





THE HOUSE IN THE HILLS

BY

FLORENCE WARDEN

Author of "The House on the Marsh," "The Inn by the Shore,"
"Joan, the Curate," etc., etc.

Florence A. P. James



R. F. FENNO & COMPANY, 9 AND 11 EAST
SIXTEENTH STREET : NEW YORK CITY

1899



PZ3
J232How

41832

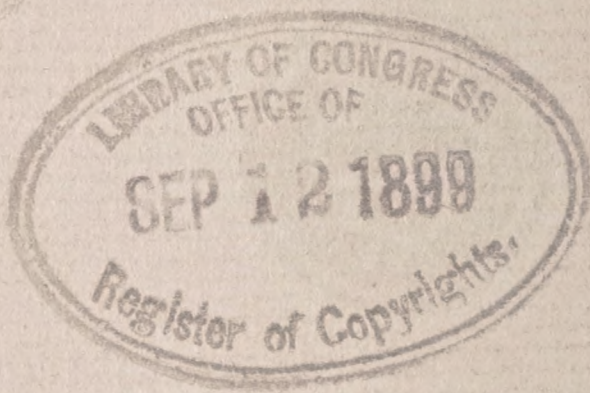
Copyright, 1899

BY

R. F. FENNO & COMPANY

TWO COPIES RECEIVED.

24/3586*



SECOND COPY,

47153

July 21. '99.

The House in the Hills

CHAPTER I.

On the 15th of September the Rev. Granville Masson wrote from Llandudno to his younger brother, a student at St. George's Hospital, London:

"MY DEAR REGIE — I don't know whether it is that my temper becomes shorter as the end of my holiday draws near, but I can't stand this place at all. It is full of people, and the crowds bother me. The weather is magnificent, which, of course, accounts for the fact that the numbers of the visitors have not yet begun to thin. As for my health, I don't know whether it is any better, but on the other hand I don't think it is any worse. My cough is still rather troublesome at night. I am a regular 'pale young curate' now, and I think I rather resent the sympathetic glances the old ladies throw in my direction. It is evident that they consider me 'interesting,' a distinction at which, to do me justice, you will own I have never aimed. I think I shall go on, staying a day or two at Bettws-y-Coed, to South Wales, to get away

from the eternal camera and bicycle, and from the equally eternal young lady with the high-pitched voice and the novel which she carries about and never reads. Yours. GRANNY."

On the 24th of September the same writer dated his letter from Aberystwith.

"DEAR REGIE—This place is better, not quite so full. On the other hand, I don't feel quite so well. This is to be accounted for, however, by the change in the weather, which is now wet and cold. I have been out to the Devil's Bridge, but I am going to do something more interesting. There are some much less frequented and wilder regions to be explored in this part of Wales than up in the North, which is like Regent street. Don't be surprised if you don't hear from me for a fortnight. I shall be on tramp. "Yours, GRANNY."

Reginald Masson, who was much troubled about the health of his brother, wrote off to him at once, on receipt of this letter, begging him not to be too venturesome and not to begin exploring unknown tracts of country in weather so unpropitious.

He got one more letter, dated September 30, acknowledging his note of warning and announcing that Granville had put off his expedition in deference to his brother's advice. The weather having now changed for the better, however, he intended to proceed without further delay.

He wrote in a robust and cheerful tone, as if in the highest spirits over his proposed excursion. He had got hold of an odd creature, he said; a wild, uncouth, red-headed son of the mountains, who was going to act as his guide and to coach him up in all the old Welsh tales and superstitions.

And then his brother heard no more.

At the end of one week Reginald was curious; at the end of the second impatient; after the lapse of a third he was anxious and worried. The weather had grown bitterly cold for the time of year, and already reports had reached London of snow in the mountains of Scotland and of heavy rains in Wales. He wrote half a dozen letters to Aberystwith, addressed to his brother, to the proprietor of the hotel where he had stayed, to the Chief of Police. But all without much result. The proprietor of the hotel wrote that the Rev. Granville Masson had left the hotel on the morning of October 2 and had taken the train with the intention, as he stated, of alighting at Trecoed and of making a tour on foot from that town among the points of interest in the neighborhood.

The Chief of Police wrote that he had heard of no accident befalling any traveller recently in the country. And the letters Reginald had addressed to his brother were returned to him.

Thoroughly alarmed, he determined to go down into Wales himself, and to make inquiries, starting from the small town of Trecoed. It was near the middle of November when he arrived

at the place and made direct for the principal inn. Here, at the very outset of his researches, he came upon the track of his brother. The innkeeper nodded intelligently at the first questions put by Reginald Masson.

"A young clergyman, tall, thin, gray eyes and brown hair? Yes, sir, he was here for one night about five weeks ago. But I can give you the exact date by looking at my books, and I can show you his portmanteau. I suppose I am right, sir, in thinking you are his brother?"

"Why, what made you think that? We are not supposed to be at all alike."

"Not in face, sir, but in voice. I could have recognized the voice anywhere, and that in spite of the way of speaking young clergymen always have."

"And can you tell me where he went to from here?"

"He was going to explore the country and make his way down gradually to the south by the Black Mountains and the Neath Valley and along the Chepstow, and then up the Wye, and so round here again to fetch his luggage."

"He meant to come back here?"

"Well, sir, he said he might and he might not. If he didn't come, he was to let me know where to send his luggage on."

"And what was the date of that?" asked Reginald Masson, whose anxiety was not much allayed by this intelligence.

The landlord was looking through his book.

"It was on the 3d of October that he went away."

"Was he alone?"

"He was alone when he left the house, but I had warned him not to cross the mountains without a guide, and he said he had engaged one."

"Ah! We can find him out, I suppose, without any trouble?"

But the landlord shook his head dubiously.

"I don't know about that, sir. It wasn't one of our regular men, I know that. It was some one he had met before he came here, near the Devil's Bridge, I understand, who had told him a lot of the local stories and legends and had arranged to take him across by Llyn Foel to Llandu."

"Did he mention his name?"

"Well, he may have done, sir, but if so I've forgotten it."

At this point of the conversation a man whose composite style of clothing suggested that, in the off season, he filled various functions at the inn, edged near enough to the speakers to show that he wished to join in the conversation.

Reginald Masson turned to look at him, and the man saluted.

"Beg pardon, sir," said he in a strong Welsh accent, "but was you speaking of the clerical gentleman who left some of his luggage here a few weeks back?"

"Yes, yes. Well?"

"It was me who saw the last of him when he

left here, sir, and he went out by himself, with just his little bag carried across him on a strap."

"By himself?"

"Yes, sir. But, look you, as soon as he had left the house, not more than a quarter of an hour after, there come up a fellow who asked for him, and who went off after him, a fellow I know very well, sir."

"Well, and who was it?"

"It was a big, red-headed fellow, sir, who's employed on one of the sheep farms over in the hills yonder. He comes in most every market day."

"And can you tell me his name?"

"No, sir. I only know him through seeing him about. He drives in the sheep, and he buys and sells in the market for his master. So I've gathered. A rough-looking customer."

Reginald Masson's heart sank. Then a passion of energy and anger seized him. It was impossible to doubt that some evil had befallen his brother, and this information seemed to point to the direction in which he must look for a solution of the mystery.

Although he was burning with impatience to prosecute his inquiries, it was too late to do so that night. Already the little town was asleep; the lights in the windows were for the most part extinguished; there was hardly a footfall in the street.

Reginald went up to his room, but he could not sleep. This rough, red-headed fellow who had come to the hotel immediately after Gran-

ville's departure from it, could be, of course, no other than the "wild, uncouth son of the mountains" of whom his brother had written in his last letter. To find this man, therefore, was plainly the first thing to be done.

On the following morning the waiter who had given him the information came up to Reginald and told him that he had made inquiries in the town that morning and learned that the name of the red-headed man was unknown, but that he was called "Coch Tal" as a nickname in the sheep market at Aberayron.

"And have you been able to find out where he lives?" asked Reginald.

"Yes, sir. It's up in the hills yonder, over by Llyn Foel. He's in the employ of a farmer yonder, Mr. Tregaron of Monachlog farm."

"Is that far off?"

"It's a matter of five or six miles, look you, up along the valley. But it would be hard for you to find without a guide, sir, being right up among the hills."

"Well, you can find me a guide, can't you?"

"Oh, yes, sir. You don't think of going to-day, sir, do you?"

"Certainly I do. Without a moment's delay."

"Well, sir, it's a nasty day for such a walk. We shall have snow before midday by the look of the sky, and when the snow comes on it's hard work for them that knows the paths well to find their way among the hills."

"Well, hard work or not, I have to go. And

if you can't find me a guide I must go without one."

Reginald was eating ham and eggs, but with very little appetite. His anxiety and feverish eagerness to be on the road made breakfast a hard task.

"All right, sir. I'll find you a guide, sir," said the waiter.

And then he shuffled away with apparent haste until he reached the door of the coffee-room, when he turned slowly and hesitatingly, and came back again. His tone had become mysterious.

"I think, perhaps, I ought to tell you, sir, something they told me this morning, when I was asking about the young man Coch Tal."

"Well, what was it?"

"I was told, sir, that he's not been seen so much in the town lately — not since the beginning of last month, in fact. He's been ill, they think; don't look the same man, sir, when he does come, as he used to look."

"Thank you. Now see about getting me the guide, there's a good fellow," said Reginald, as he jumped from his seat and began to button up his coat. "My boots, please."

"You've quite made up your mind to go, sir?"

"Quite."

The matter of obtaining a guide into the hills proved, however, to be less easy than Reginald had supposed. He had to wait so long, in fact, before the waiter, who had undertaken the search for one, returned to the inn, that at last

Reginald, unable to control his impatience any longer, told the landlord to send the guide after him, and started on his journey into the hills alone.

The flakes of snow had already begun to flutter down, and he was strongly advised to give up his expedition until the following day. He would not, however, hear of any delay.

He started at a brisk pace, quite undisturbed by any thought that his journey might be one of difficulty or even danger. The lightly falling snow threw a soft veil over the landscape, softening the rugged outline of the hills towards which he was going, and filling up the ruts in the road.

He had gone some distance, walking quickly, and deeply preoccupied with his gloomy thoughts concerning his brother's fate, when it occurred to him to wonder why the guide was such a long time in coming.

At the same moment the thought came into his mind, with an ugly persistency, that it was in this very same fashion that Granville had started on the expedition which had, in all probability, been a fatal one to him.

CHAPTER II.

Reginald Masson turned round, and looked back along the way by which he had come.

At least, it would be more correct to say that he tried to do so. For he now perceived that the snow had for the last ten minutes been coming down so fast as to reduce the wide space over which he had travelled to a flat expanse, in which to trace out the road by which he had come was, to his inexperienced eyes, an impossibility.

His very foot tracks, not having been made in deep snow, were already obliterated; and the wind was driving the flakes straight into his eyes as he stared and stared, vainly trying to recognize some landmark by which he could find his way back.

He felt that to venture further without the guide would be madness. Yet to go back, now that the snow was driving from that direction, was almost equally difficult. As he paused for one moment, deliberating, and blinking to keep the snow out of his smarting eyes, he heard a man's voice behind him, evidently at some distance, singing one of those wild, half-mournful, wholly tender Welsh ballads which are forever on the lips of these people of the mountains.

Reginald Masson turned again, facing the

mountains once more. With his back to the wind, it was easier to see, and he managed to distinguish a dark figure on the rising ground a little way ahead of him, making its way slowly through the snow in the direction of the hills.

Reginald shouted, but the man went on singing and took no notice. Against the whitening background and through the veil of falling snow his figure stood out, seeming to be gigantic in size.

There was nothing for Reginald to do but to follow this, the only human figure in sight. Quickening his pace, not without difficulty, for the road had dwindled into a rough foot track, he came up with the stranger at a point where the path began to wind round the side of a hill. By this time the town was so far behind and the snow was falling so thickly that Reginald Masson felt that the only safe thing to do was to address himself to this stranger, who could hardly be as ignorant of the country as he was himself.

The man had quickened his pace; and was now making his way, still singing to himself, with long strides, which made it difficult for the town-bred Masson to overtake him. So that at last Reginald had to speak from behind, without having had one opportunity of seeing the face of the man he was addressing.

"Can you tell me," called out he, "if I am on the right road for Monachlog, and how far off it is?"

The man in front had stopped with a discon-

18 The House in the Hills

certing suddenness before his interlocutor had got to the end of his question. His body, which had been bent nearly double as he ascended the hill, thick stick in hand, had become upright and rigid, but he did not turn round, and he did not answer.

Reginald, coming a step nearer and trying to get a look at the man's face, repeated his question.

He might as well have poured his words into the ears of a statue of bronze. The stranger, a man of enormous height, dressed in the rough clothing of the hillside peasant, his head and face almost hidden behind the collar of a coat which he wore cloak fashion over his shoulders, answered never a word — did not even turn his face toward his questioner.

Supposing that the man was deaf, Reginald, who was now close to him, touched him on the arm. But the moment he did so a paroxysm of terror seemed to seize the fellow; he shook off the light touch with an abrupt and violent movement, and, still without turning his head, began to run up the hillside path as if for his life.

For a few seconds Reginald watched him in amazement, thinking that the fellow must be an imbecile. But then it occurred to him as possible that it might be only the uncouth native way of treating a stranger, a way compounded of rustic shyness and superstitious fear. For fear was apparently the emotion uppermost in the heart of the flying countryman.

The snow was now coming down in larger flakes; the sky had grown heavy and lowering. After one more glance back Reginald saw that to follow this son of the mountains was his best chance of safety. The man had now got so far ahead, however, being evidently used to these paths in all weathers, and sure of foot as a mule, that Reginald had some difficulty in keeping him in sight.

Up the rugged, slowly ascending footpath, which he would never have been able to find but for the footprints of the peasant, winding round the hill, descending again, turning, twisting about among the rough hill tracks, now with a peep into glens and valleys where the gray shadows lurked in the corners, now shut in on all sides by the bare and stony hills, Reginald followed his unwitting guide.

The way grew wilder as they went. The hills grew loftier, stonier; patches of dark gray rock showed black against the snow, while here and there a tuft of bush and briar, or a lonely, stunted tree, stood up from the white ground like a gaunt, misshapen figure, bent into strange curves by the weight of the snow it bore, and seeming to point with a dark, fleshless finger into the recesses of the barren hills.

The figure in front had never once turned, and Reginald felt sure that the sturdy mountaineer was unaware that he was serving as guide to the stranger whom he had treated so cavalierly. At last, after a rough and toilsome descent of a barren hillside, made dangerous to the foot pas-

senger by great quantities of small, loose stones, the pursuer having at last gained somewhat upon the pursued, the two found themselves in a cleft of the mountains, through which a wild, weird sight presented itself to the view.

In a rough basin formed by the stony, barren mountains, lay stretched before their eyes the dark waters of a lake, which looked inky-black against the snow which lay all around. Here and there on its borders a great gray boulder, snow-capped, but bare and dark on its scooped-out sides, stood upon the flat expanse of untrodden snow. Nothing else, not a tree, not a bush, broke up the monotonous stretch of bleak, desolate shore and black, lonely pool. As the big snowflakes fluttered down swiftly and softly into the black waters, each absorbed as soon as it fell, Reginald shuddered, with a sudden hideous fancy that in some such silent, grim fashion, a lonely traveller might be swallowed up by the cold, placid waters of this mountain tarn in the shadow of the hills.

Even the rustic in front seemed to be impressed by the wild and awful desolation of the scene; at any rate he paused, and thus gave Reginald an opportunity of getting up to him.

Determined not to be evaded or avoided this time, Masson seized the huge peasant in a strong grip, and with an unexpected movement, brought him face to face with himself so suddenly that the other man slipped upon the loose stones, lost his footing and fell down.

As he did so, his round cap fell off, and Reg-

inald Masson, with a great leap up of the heart, saw that his head was covered by a thick crop of short red hair.

"Coch Tal!" shouted Masson.

The peasant made no answer except by a guttural exclamation.

But his face, which had been red with exercise, blanched to a livid pallor. He scrambled to his feet, and with one wild stroke of his stick, which Reginald was quick enough to avoid, he sprang like a deer down the narrow ravine, and disappeared behind a spur of the hill.

CHAPTER III.

With a savage shout, as the huge mountaineer escaped him, Reginald Masson sprang down the ravine after him. He could not doubt that this was the very man of whom he was in search, the man who could give him, if he chose, some news of Granville's fate. That this information would have to be wrung out of him by the ungentlest means, and that, when obtained, it would amount to little more than a tissue of lies, he felt sure.

In the wild eyes and blanched cheeks of Coch Tal, Reginald had read the signs of an abject, sick terror, which warned him of what he already guessed, that his brother's fate had been a tragic one, and that this rough, uncouth creature, whom he had taken for his guide, was cognizant, to say the least, of the details of it.

As he stumbled down the mountain side in hot pursuit, indeed, Reginald felt not a doubt but that he was chasing his brother's murderer. Everything that he had heard and seen seemed to confirm this impression, which stamped itself each moment more firmly in his mind.

There flashed through his brain, even as he ran, stumbling, leaping, sinking in the snow at every other step, those words of the waiter at the inn, telling him that Coch Tal had been ill

since the beginning of last month — the time of Granville's disappearance; that he had been seen less in the town since that date; that he had seemed, since then, "a changed man."

These circumstances, trifling in themselves, became important when taken in conjunction with the man's horror at the sound of Reginald's voice. He felt that it was the resemblance between his voice and his brother's which had struck such infinite terror into the mind of the peasant; terror which had become more acute when he heard his own nickname pronounced by the lips of a man whom he had never seen before.

And while these thoughts, stimulated by the fierce passion which possessed him, chased each other through Reginald's mind, his feet flew from point to point of the rough way, with ever increasing rapidity. It seemed as if the exaltation of his mind had communicated new powers to his body; for he followed Coch Tal with more ease, more security than before, and rounding the hill at a great pace when he reached the foot of it, he found himself only a little way behind the object of his pursuit.

The peasant heard him, gave one look round, and uttering once more the guttural exclamation, like the cry of a wild bird, which had chilled Reginald's blood when they first came face to face, he went on his way at a swifter pace than ever.

On they went again, pursuer and pursued, with the snow and the wind driving at their backs, filling up the crevices and the ruts in the

rough foot tracks, and swirling into drifts to right and left of them.

Up the rough side of a mountain, which looked as they approached it like the stone wall of a huge fortress or prison; up, up, up, tearing his hands on the crags of rugged gray stone, which jutted like pin-points out of the snow-drifts, went Reginald, his teeth set and his heart beating like a hammer in his breast.

The mountaineer could beat him at this work: could climb like a cat where his pursuer could only crawl. And the distance between the two began rapidly to increase. The peasant was out of sight when Reginald reached the top.

There were now only the footprints in the snow to guide him, but even as he took the first step forward in the track Coch Tal had made a gust of wind, which he felt with redoubled force on this bleak hilltop, whirled the snow-flakes round him in a blinding storm, forcing him to turn and to shelter his face. When for some seconds the blast had howled and whistled and roared in his deafened ears, and the drifts had swept up from the ground in blinding sheets of stinging spray, there was a sudden lull, a momentary calm, and as the wind died the snow fell less heavily.

Reginald raised his head, shook himself clear from the thick white coatings of hard dry snow, and looked around him for the traces of the peasant's footsteps.

They were gone, all trace of them swept away under the smooth white sheet.

He shivered as he looked about him; down into the dark waters of the black tarn below him on his left hand; at the barren hills on the sides of which great perpendicular slabs of cold gray rock relieved the white mass and disclosed the stony bareness of the soil; at the lowering clouds above, which seemed to be descending on his head; at the never ending prospect of hills, hills, bare and cold and white, and melting into forlorn gray distances on every side.

Look which way he would, he could see no sign of human habitation. Chilled to the marrow with something which was worse than cold, worse almost than fear, he recognized the desperate situation in which he was placed and knew that the chances of his getting back to Trecoed alive were infinitesimally small.

Although he had left the inn before noon, with the day before him, he saw by his watch that it was already 4 o'clock, and the gray of the winter evening was already gathering in the valleys and ravines beneath.

Where should he turn? Not back by the way he had come, even if that had been possible. For he had passed not a hut, not a cottage, and he could not hope to find his road to Trecoed before night fell.

Making a rapid exploration of the small tableland on which he stood, Reginald fancied that he descried, half way up the side of a hill on his right, of lower elevation than the one upon which he was standing, and less rugged in appearance, a gray shapeless something which

looked like the fragment of a ruined building. In his desperate plight even such a chance of a precarious shelter for the night as a ruin might afford caused him a sensation of something acute as joy.

To discover this possible refuge was one thing, but to get to it was another. So Reginald Masson soon found as he started down that side of the mountain which appeared to offer the most direct route. This descent was the most perilous thing he had undertaken that day; the mountain was steep, strewn with loose stones, and its pitfalls and inequalities were hidden beneath the snow.

Any sort of path or foot track was of course not to be discerned; a way had to be found, haphazard, between the jutting gray crags and a stunted growth of rugged pine trees, which grew on the side of this hill a little distance from the summit.

Having passed through the narrow belt of wood Masson found himself, without warning, on the brink of a perpendicular cliff, which formed one side of a mountain pass, 100 feet below him.

The snow was falling heavily again, the daylight had grown fainter, and the ruin toward which his steps were bent was no longer in sight. He turned back, and making his way among the rough tree trunks, which afforded some valuable assistance in the scramble among the stones, he got at last to the bottom of the

hill, and, turning to the left, reached something like level ground.

Then he stopped and looked about him. The silence, the loneliness, were awful. The big flakes of snow touched his face like the cold fingers of dead hands. Before him he saw nothing but the bare, bleak sides of the mountain pass, and a black patch beyond which he knew to be the waters of Llyn Foel. At his feet trickled, in a thin, snake-like line, the feeble lake-fed stream which became, some miles away, a fair sized river. Behind him was a dreary white waste and all around were frowning heights of gray, grim hills, with the night shadows growing black in the crevices which the snow could not reach.

The oppression on his spirits was so great that he felt it a labor to draw breath. With difficulty groping in his mind toward a remembrance of the relative positions of the pass, the mountain he had descended, and the hill upon which he had discerned the ruin which it was his ambition to reach, he at last turned his back to the pass and made his way with difficulty beside the stream, the course of which he followed.

He had gone some fifty yards, and had seen or heard nothing to help him on his way, when a sound suddenly reached his ears and seemed to pierce the air like an arrow.

It was nothing but a moan, a cry, pitiful, agonizing. But it was the sound of a human voice.

CHAPTER IV.

Reginald Masson raised his head sharply and threw all the force of his lungs into a shout which echoed in the hills. There was a pause and his heart began to fail him again, for fear that he should get no reply.

Then above him on his left hand he heard a man's voice calling:

"Hello! Hello!"

He made out the direction whence the voice proceeded, a point almost immediately above him. He paused again, but hearing nothing more, and fearing that this chance of meeting a fellow human being might escape him, he leaped across the little stream and began a vigorous attempt to ascend the hill.

This was comparatively easy, for instead of the stones and crags of the last mountain he had climbed his feet reached down through the snow to a springy surface of dry heather, slippery in places, but less treacherous than the rolling stones. He shouted once more on his way up, but got no reply.

Resolved not to let this opportunity of human companionship escape him, Masson then went on quietly and as quickly as he could, without uttering any further sound. From the tones of the voice he heard — tones of acute suffering —

he judged that the man who had uttered them had come to grief on his way among the mountains, and had wondered whether it was Coch Tal, who, in escaping from himself, had met with an accident.

As usual among the mountains, Masson climbed for a much longer time than he had bargained for before he came to anything but little table-lands, with more hills beyond. Again and again he thought he must have reached the very summit, and again and again, on arriving at what he had supposed to be the last point, he found another point to be scaled beyond.

Then at last he found himself face to face with a man.

Not the red-headed peasant, but a creature as unlike him as possible, a small, lithe, black-eyed man, with a keen, hawk-like face and a wiry little frame, a real son of the Silures, who stopped short in his hurried walk up and down the ledge of the mountain he occupied and glared at the intruder with fierce eyes.

"Who are you? Who are you? What are you doing here?" he asked in good English, but with the sharp Welsh accent very strongly marked.

Although his words contained no welcome, and although the look in his face was as unpromising as his words themselves, Masson was so much relieved by the sight of another human being that he answered buoyantly enough.

"I am a stranger in these parts. I've lost my

way. I should be thankful for a night's shelter. I can't get back to Trecoed to-night."

As he spoke Reginald Masson examined the man's features, in which he found traces of no mean intelligence; and his dress, by which he guessed him to be a small farmer, a man of higher class than Coch Tal.

And in the pause which succeeded his words Masson noted also that he had reached the very point toward which he had meant to make his way. For on a mountain ledge a little higher than the one on which they stood he saw the gray walls which had attracted him from the neighboring mountain, and a ruined arch, lofty and pointed, which had once been the east window of an abbey church.

Even in the first brief glance, through the still falling snow, and in the gathering darkness, he discerned that a stately Gothic doorway had been filled in to fit a mean little painted door, and that a portion of what had once been a handsome pile of monastic buildings had been roughly roofed in for modern occupation. To the left of the door a window had been inserted into the solid masonry, and through this window a feeble light glimmered so faintly that it threw no patch of warning light on the snow outside.

At the corner of the building a large snow-drift had already collected, and this was gradually extending, as the snow still fell and the wind still blew, in the direction of the window.

The farmer, after a long pause, answered

Masson's request ungraciously enough. His manner was short, sharp, surly. But it was less offensive than defensive, Masson thought, betraying as it did a mind ill at ease.

"Back to Trecoed! What made you leave Trecoed on such a day as this?" he said gruffly, while his quick eyes looked searchingly, not at Reginald, but down into the valley from which he had just climbed. "You must have been out of your senses, man, to try. And across the hills, too!"

He seemed less pitiful for the stranger's distresses than scornful of his folly.

"Yes, it was a rash thing to do. I was to have had a guide, but I started without him."

The other man laughed, mirthlessly, contemptuously.

"Oh, aye; the guide knew better what he was about than you did!"

"You won't refuse me a night's shelter?"

The man shook his head.

"We've no shelter to give," he said, shortly.

"I can pay for it well."

The unwilling host looked at him with a little more interest, but he again shook his head.

"It's not possible just now," said he, in the same half-defiant, wholly surly tone. "There's illness in the house, and no time for waiting on strangers, with my daughter, my poor girl, lying at death's door."

As he uttered these words the expression of his face underwent a sudden change and a look of unutterable anguish shone in his black eyes.

"Ill?" said Masson. "Your daughter ill? Perhaps I can be of some use, then. I'm a doctor."

The man, who had turned away as if to hide his own distress, sprang upon him with a wild look of joy in his sensitive face. He seized Masson by the arm with the nervous grip of a small, strong hand, and holding him tight stared up into his face as if he would force out some truth which the other wished to conceal from him.

"You — a doctor? No, no!" he said hoarsely, stammering in his excitement. "You say so, you say that — to get the night's shelter you have been asking for! No, no, you're not a doctor. It's too much — too much to hope for — too much, too much!"

"Let me go," said Masson, good-humoredly. "I can soon prove it to you, I think. Let me get at my pockets."

But already the man was convinced. Masson's attitude, his readiness to give his credentials had been enough for the eager father.

At the first plunge into his pockets Masson brought out a small case of surgical instruments which he always carried about with him, and the moment he drew it out the little Welshman seized him again and began to drag him upward toward his dwelling.

"Come in, come in," said he in a broken whisper. "Come in, sir, and don't bear me malice for treating you so shabbily at first. I'm nigh

beside myself, that I am, sir, and now — now — oh, thank God, thank God!”

And the excitable little fellow burst into loud sobbing and climbed up the slope toward the gray ruin above, still holding Masson in a firm grip with one hand and hiding his contorted face with the other.

From the size of the ruined building which had been converted into a farmhouse, and from the appearance of such of the old walls as were left, Masson decided without difficulty that the remains were monastic, although the situation was higher than was usually the case with such peaceful institutions.

The position was, however, sheltered and pleasant, protected on the north side by a mountain of great steepness, and so hemmed in by lesser hills on the east and west sides as to leave it open only to the milder south.

As Masson allowed himself to be led forward, he noticed that the ruins on the left and the fragments of an east window were the remains of a church of small size, and he conjectured that the portion of the ruin which had been made habitable was what was left of the monastery itself.

In the darkness, however, with the snow still falling, and his companion hurrying him forward, he had little leisure to take accurate note of his surroundings. The ground, moreover, was uneven and rough, being encumbered by stones and by fragments of overgrown ruin. They came upon the door quite suddenly, as

they got round the base of a massive pillar, which, no longer supporting anything, stood by itself like a sentinel before the incongruous pile of old and new, mean things and stately, which formed the farmer's home.

They dashed into the dwelling quickly, and the farmer, drawing his companion in, shut the door and paused for breath.

Reginald looked round him with astonishment and interest.

The room in which he found himself had evidently been the refectory of the monastery, for the stone pulpit in the wall where the reader used to stand during the dinner hour was still to be seen, though broken and imperfect, on the south side of the room.

A rough partition wall of lath and plaster had been erected just beyond this pulpit, and in this partition were two doors leading to the other apartments of the farm house.

On the right, opposite to the pulpit in the wall, was a huge open fireplace partly filled in with bricks, in which a fire of logs was burning.

On the left wall, which was roughly white-washed, the outlines of the lower part of a row of beautiful early English windows, divided by clusters of slender pillars, were plainly to be seen. Small latticed windows and more bricks and mortar filled up the spaces where the lights had been.

The huge beams of rough wood overhead, dark and dusty, showed that the farmhouse had stood in its present condition for a length of

years. The floor was red tiled, clean and bright; the oak settees and presses, the pots and pans on the white dresser, the neat hearth, the fresh white walls, all testified to the care of a housewifely hand.

But the only creature in the room was a withered and bent old woman, wearing a large apron of check print over her dark dress, a small shawl drawn tightly round her shoulders and a clean white cap, who sat in a rocking chair almost over the fire, with crossed legs, a short pipe between her lips and her eyes fixed on the red heart of the fire.

She neither spoke nor moved when the farmer and his guest entered; only her eyes, black and keen as those of the farmer himself, turned slowly, took in all the details of the stranger's appearance, and then moved round again slowly toward the glowing logs.

Masson, bewildered and dazzled by the change into light and warmth, almost staggered when he found himself once more on a level floor.

The farmer had advanced to the fire, and, bending to warm his hands in the blaze, said a few words to the old woman. They formed a question, Masson knew by the tone. But he could not understand it, as it was in the Welsh language.

As the farmer's thin, muscular hands were stretched out over the flames, Masson caught sight of a ring on the little finger of his right hand which caused him to shudder with a horror which chilled his blood.

It was an old-fashioned ring, of singular design. In a broad band of gold, deeply and heavily chased, was set a circle of plain gold half an inch wide, in which was an amethyst of a deep purple color.

A most singular ring, not to be mistaken for another; old-fashioned, quaint, clumsy, handsome with an old-time beauty of good workmanship and of old association.

For Reginald Masson recognized it as a ring which had belonged to his own grandfather, a ring which his brother Granville had worn always on the little finger of his left hand.

CHAPTER V.

Reginald Masson could not repress an exclamation when he recognized his brother's ring on the farmer's hand.

He came a step nearer, still with his eyes steadily fixed on the jewel, until at last he touched it with his trembling finger. The farmer, who had watched him in some surprise, frowned and drew back as the other advanced.

"I beg your pardon," said Masson quickly; "but — the ring on your finger — I — I — have only seen one like it before." As he spoke he came a step nearer still and seized the farmer's hand. His own agitation increased as he examined the ring more closely and assured himself beyond a doubt that it was indeed his brother's. "I — I — Will you tell me how you got it? You must forgive the question; you will forgive it, when I tell you that when I last saw the ring it was upon the hand of my own brother."

His feelings had by this time possessed him so strongly that he dropped the hand of the farmer, which had remained passive and cold in his, and supported himself for a few moments against the wall by the fireplace. The awful fears as to his brother's fate which had filled his heart for so long had, upon this strange discovery, reached the point of acute agony. Although he

felt, he knew that he had need of all his coolness, of all his self-possession, to get at the heart of the mystery upon the borders of which he found himself, neither feeling nor knowledge helped him in that first awful moment.

"My brother! My poor brother!"

His lips formed the words, but did not utter them. He was unable to see, or to think. The pitiful consciousness that the ring was now nothing but a relic of the dead unnerved, overwhelmed him.

The farmer's husky voice roused him after the lapse of a few seconds.

"It's very strange, sir; very strange, if what you say should turn out to be true," said he, less brusquely than before. "But, for sure, it's a most uncommon ring, and it's true I haven't had it long, nor I can't tell who had it before me."

Masson had roused himself already from the despondency and despair into which the first sight of the ring had thrown him. As he turned toward the farmer the latter took the ring from his finger and put it into the trembling hand of his guest.

"Maybe," went on the farmer, "you'll see some marks, if you look at it close, by which you may tell for certain one way or the other."

Reginald nodded.

"I can identify it beyond all shadow of a doubt," said he in a broken voice. "It was left to my brother by my mother's father. How did it come into your possession?"

"I'll tell you all about it, sir, presently, when you have seen my daughter," said he. "But meantime you're welcome to keep it, sir, till you've heard all there is to tell about it. When you have heard that, you'll be able to say for certain, I expect, whether the ring was your brother's. This way, sir, please."

The matter of the ring, singular as it was, seemed to have but little interest for him, so deeply absorbed was he in anxiety for his daughter. But it was not unnatural that he should appear to look with something like suspicion at a guest who had made so strange a claim. As Masson advanced, therefore, toward the inner door, which was held open for him to pass through, the farmer watched him narrowly with his keen black eyes.

And Masson, returning his gaze, was more impressed than before by a countenance which changed so rapidly in its expression from despair to curiosity, and back again to despair.

They passed into the back room formed by the remaining portion of the refectory. It was evidently used as a washhouse, bakehouse and as a place of storage, not as a living room. The walls were characterized by the same free use of whitewash as in the big kitchen; a beautiful arcade with clusters of slender pillars, on the left hand side, which time had defaced but little, having been included in this modern "restoration."

In one corner was a rough wooden staircase with a small landing at the top. On each side

of this was a door, and having ascended the stairs with the farmer, Masson followed him into a large room at the back, where there were two small beds and a few pieces of substantial, old-fashioned furniture. There were some strips of drugget on the clean floor; there were curtains of bright turkey red over the windows, of which there were two, looking west; a fire was burning in a small grate on the right, and the whole room showed the cleanliness and care which had been noticeable in the kitchen. On the top of a chest of drawers the farmer pointed out a little medicine chest.

Only one of the beds was occupied, and as the farmer led the way toward it the girl lying in it turned her head quickly, and fixed upon the stranger a pair of large, glittering eyes.

Masson took the chair beside the bed which the farmer placed for him, and looked at her by the light of a candle, which her father brought across the room from the mantelpiece.

While he made his examination the girl continued to stare at him fixedly, and as she did so her brows gradually contracted with a slight frown. Not a word had been uttered by any one of the three.

At last the farmer spoke.

"Well, sir?" said he in a tremulous voice.

Masson looked up quickly and was touched to the heart. Down the farmer's thin, swarthy face the tears were streaming like rain.

"She's very ill, ain't she, sir? My poor Gwyn."

"She's ill, certainly, but you mustn't give way like that!" said Masson.

He had taken the girl's hand and was feeling her pulse. The moment he spoke he felt a strong tremor run through her, and, glancing at her quickly, he saw that the strained, intent look with which she had previously regarded him had changed to an expression of terror.

Still she did not utter a sound.

Perceiving that for some reason which he could not divine, his patient looked upon him with fear if not mistrust, the young doctor hastened to leave the room, after uttering a few more reassuring words, each one of which seemed, however, to have the effect of deepening the impression of horror with which he appeared to have inspired her.

When he reached the door, Masson threw, in turning to leave the room, one last glance at the girl. She had raised her head a little, the better to watch him; and her lips were moving rapidly, as if she was forming words with her mouth which something within bade her not to utter.

So much struck was he by this attitude of his patient that he turned to her father and said, in a low voice:

"Is she always shy and afraid of strangers? My coming seems to alarm her terribly."

"No, sir," answered the farmer. "Gwyn's not so shy, considering she lives in the wilds."

The girl was still watching with the same feverish intentness, and Masson, who began to

fear that this horror or aversion on her part would interfere with his chances of success with the case, went back to the bedside, in the hope of finding some words to say to her which would put him on a more favorable footing.

But on seeing him approach, she sank back on her pillow and closed her eyes. He stood for a few seconds looking at her face, which was that of a well-grown, handsome girl of some 18 or 20 years, with masses of black hair; and then, as she kept her eyes resolutely shut and still uttered no word, he withdrew without disturbing her.

At the door, however, for the second time, he saw that she had raised her head to watch him go out.

CHAPTER VI.

The farmer scarcely waited to close the door of the room before questioning the doctor.

"Will she get over it, sir? Will she get over it? It's no use deceiving me, sir. I know she's very ill. But — will my dear get over it? Or will she — will she ——"

His voice faltered and died away. Great drops of sweat stood upon his forehead. He clutched the doctor's arm in a grip of iron.

"We must always hope for the best," began the doctor.

But at these doubtful words the farmer spurned him with so much violence that it was only by a quick movement that Masson escaped being flung down the stairs on the tiles of the outhouse below.

"I beg pardon, I beg pardon, sir," cried the farmer, contrite immediately, as he held out a beseeching hand toward the guest he had a moment before treated so roughly. "But if you knew how I feel, what it would mean to me if — if my girl — my bonny girl was to die —" Again his voice shook so much that it was almost inaudible, "you'd forgive me."

He was trembling so much that he staggered, and held on by the rough stair rail for support. Masson, who had gone down two or three steps,

looked up with warm pity into his drawn and quivering face.

"Indeed," said the doctor, "I am telling you the truth when I say you have no need to give up hope. Your daughter is very ill, there is no denying that. But she is young; she has a fine physique, and we may well hope to pull her through."

"What do you call the fever, sir, that she's got?"

"Pneumonia."

"Ah! That comes of cold, don't it?"

"Yes."

"That's got by being out in all weathers, looking after the live stock when I was ill myself. Poor Gwyn! My poor little Gwyn! If you knew what she was like, sir, what a sunshine she is about the place, why you wouldn't be surprised at my taking on so!"

"Do you leave her alone up there?" asked Masson.

"No, sir. I was up with her myself all night, and her granny's been with her all day, till Gwyn herself sent her downstairs to get my tea for me. And to-night it's her brother's turn, only he's afraid, the blockhead!"

"I'll do the watching to-night. But I should like you to tell her who I am, that I'm a doctor, and that there's nothing to be alarmed about. She seems to be afraid of me."

"Why, yes, sir, I noticed it myself. I'll speak to her. And thank you kindly, sir, for your offer. I won't refuse. For you'll know what to

'do for the best, for sure, and you wouldn't let her die, a young thing like that, if you could help it, sir; that I know!"

"Of course not. But you have more to hope from her youth and strength than from anything I or any one else can do."

"And now come, sir, and have a bite of something yourself. You must be starved, after all these hours in the cold. Come, sir; come, and you're heartily welcome to the best we've got."

Transformed into the most attentive of hosts to the guest who was ready to try to save his daughter, the farmer drew Masson into the kitchen, where another figure, that of a thick-set, heavy looking lad of 16 or 17, now completed the strange party.

He was sitting cowering over the fire in his rough shepherd's dress; and, when told by his father to lay the table for supper, he rose clumsily, pulled his hair by way of salutation to the guest and shambled awkwardly toward the dresser in obedience.

"This gentleman," said the farmer, introducing Masson, "is a doctor, and he's promised to sit up with your sister, Tom. So you can make yourself easy, you can go to bed yourself and snore yourself hoarse."

Tom raised his head at this intelligence, and it was evident that he was much relieved in his mind by it. He saluted again and quickened his pace as he laid the cloth on the table.

The old grandmother, meanwhile, sat by the fire in exactly the same position as when Mas-

son had first entered the house. And she watched the stranger in exactly the same way as before, moving her eyes, but not her head, and looking, now that he was less dazzled by the lights and able to take a better view of her, more like a witch than ever.

The farmer, whose sense of hospitality had grown keen with his gratitude to the doctor, now insisted on his coming upstairs again to his own room, taking off his overcoat and his wet boots, and putting on a pair of carpet slippers belonging to the farmer himself.

This bedroom, which was over the kitchen, contained two beds, like the other, and was furnished in the same plain and solid manner. An absence of the few small pictures and ornaments which had relieved the severity of the back room was the chief point of distinction of the apartment occupied by the farmer and his son. Everywhere there was the same exquisite cleanliness, everywhere the same prevalence of whitewash. Here, as in the other rooms, the old windows had been filled up with bricks and mortar, and new ones, small, mean, latticed, had been introduced into the depths of the old monastic walls.

Masson hurried downstairs after the farmer, eager and anxious to learn the history of the ring, which his host had promised to tell him.

He feared, however, from the indifference with which he had treated the subject that the farmer could have but little to relate. If he had known of a tragedy connected with the fate of

its late possessor he could not have handed the relic so readily, so calmly to the first man who came to him with a tale about it. On the other hand, it seemed probable that Masson's inquiries would set the farmer thinking, and that gratitude for services rendered to his daughter might make him ready to do his best to assist the doctor in his researches into the mystery.

It was not until after supper was over, however, that Masson got a chance of speaking upon the subject so near to his heart. The old woman had disappeared, had gone up to Gwyn, so the farmer explained. The three men had the meal by themselves. Nothing was now good enough for the stranger whose first appearance had been made so unpropitiously. The farmer and his son both waited upon him, pressed him to do justice to the well-spread board, treated him with the utmost deference and courtesy.

There was a fourth plate upon the table, which Masson supposed to have been placed for the old woman. However, when supper was half over, the farmer rested his knife and fork for an instant on the table and asked shortly:

"Where's Merrick?"

Tom, who was chary of his words, and who seemed also to speak English with difficulty, shook his head.

"I declare," went on the farmer, whose appetite had been so much affected by his anxiety for his daughter that he ate but little, "I'd forgotten all about the fellow. Hasn't he been in?"

"In and out again," answered his son, laconically. "When he heard ——"

Tom turned his eyes slyly and shyly in the direction of the guest and said no more.

The farmer turned to Masson.

"Too shy, the great oaf, to come in when he heard of a stranger being here, sir!" said he.

"Another son of yours?" asked the doctor.

"No, sir; but my hand on the farm. He and me and Tom does it all, 'cepting for the help we used to get from poor Gwyn, and a extry hand or so in the lambing season, and to get in such poor crops as we have up here. And now, sir, if you please to smoke, will you light up your pipe, and take this chair in the corner."

Supper being over, Tom cleared the table in the same awkward manner in which he had laid it, and then disappeared, with half a loaf of bread in one hand and a heaped-up plateful of meat pie in the other.

"They're pals, those two," said the farmer, jerking his head back in the direction his son had taken, as he went upstairs himself to take another look at his daughter. "Always hang together, do Merrick and Tom."

And the farmer shut the door between the kitchen and the washhouse with a nod to Masson which was meant as an apology for leaving him to himself.

Left alone, comfortably seated in the large armchair by the glowing fire, which was built up of peat and logs, the young doctor stretched out his legs in a moment's blissful ease of body,

a moment's triumph of the frame over the spirit.

Worn out by the long day's climbing and struggling, straining of the eyes and stress of the mind, Reginald Masson sat inert, motionless, with all his faculties benumbed, in a delicious, drowsy sense of peace. For a moment even his desperate anxiety about his brother's fate was dulled; he sat back with his head on the old red cushion, hearing the roaring and whistling of the wind without listening to it, the hissing of the hard snow-showers against the window-panes, and the crackling of the fire as the flakes came down the chimney, and, melting as they fell, reached the glowing logs, which spluttered and then burned the more fiercely for the moisture.

He closed his eyes, and presently, lulled by the warmth, the comfort, worn out by fatigue both of body and mind, he sank into a doze. Without waking, he found himself undergoing a curious experience; he felt, or dreamed, or fancied that he was dying and that the mourners who were to accompany his body to the grave side were bending over him, waiting for the end.

He thought, or dreamed, or fancied that they grew impatient, that they called each other's attention to the wind which was rising and to the storm which was beginning to rage, and murmured that they must make haste, make haste.

He heard the murmurs with some faint surprise, but without any sensation so vivid as

horror or fear. And then he thought that a hand was laid upon his chest, and that it crept closer and closer to his face.

At that point he thought that he cried out, and sat up. And then the murmurs ceased and the hand was withdrawn.

Then he started up, and staggered, and looked around him, with the icy grip of a great terror on his heart.

He knew he had been asleep, and he saw at once that his slumber must have lasted some time, for the fire had died down and he was cold. A great draught of chilly air was blowing in from somewhere, and he perceived that the door in the side wall by which the lad Tom had gone out had been left ajar. On the clean floor, in a direct line to and from this door, were footprints, still quite wet.

The candles on the mantelpiece had been blown out before they had burned down appreciably lower than they had been at supper time.

But the most uncanny discovery of all was that on the floor, beside the chair in which he had been sitting, there were some biscuit crumbs and a tiny fragment of torn envelope.

With quick suspicion Masson thrust his hand into that one of his coat pockets which had been the most easily accessible, and, pulling out the contents, found that the scrap of paper exactly corresponded with the missing corner of a torn envelope he carried there, and the crumbs with a broken biscuit he had brought from the hotel at Trecoed. The rest of the pocket's con-

tents were equally valueless and nothing had been taken away.

Nevertheless, he felt a chill run through his very bones at the certain knowledge that some person or persons had come into the rooms while he slept and had begun an examination of his pockets, which would probably have resulted in robbery if he or they had not been disturbed.

Robbery! Would they have stopped at that?

For, putting up his hand to his neck, he found that the white silk muffler which he had wound around his neck in place of his wet collar had been untied.

The doctor, now fully aroused and conscious that there were dangers under the shelter he had found quite as great as those he had encountered on the mountains outside, followed the wet footmarks across the floor and opened wide the door to which they led.

At first he could see nothing on the other side of it; it was cold, it was draughty, it was dark; but he knew that he was not in the open air. He went back into the kitchen, lit one of the tallow-candles and carried it out into the cavernous blackness, into a mouldy, damp smell, and into a wide, covered space, the floor of which was partly boarded and partly paved in the roughest manner with broken stones. A storehouse this, evidently. There were stacks of wood and peat; there was a built-up mound of roots, partly covered with straw and earth. There was lumber of all sorts besides, giving to

the place so many nooks and corners and hiding-places that Masson knew it would be unwise if not impossible to hunt out the person or persons who, he felt sure, lay hidden there, watching him as he moved.

For he could hear those slight, hardly distinguishable sounds which betray the presence of a living creature in concealment. He looked up and saw that the roof was of rough beams and boards, through which the snow came here and there.

"Any one here?" he asked.

But no voice answered.

He repeated the question in a firmer, almost menacing manner, and then a figure appeared in the doorway behind him.

He recognized in a moment the farmer himself.

"Why, sir, what are you doing in here?"

The question, uttered in a genial, hospitable tone, struck warmth into Masson's heart. He retreated at once into the kitchen, and turned toward his host a face which betrayed some of the sensations he had just experienced.

"Why, sir, you look as if you'd had a fright, that you do," said the farmer, as he took the candle from the doctor's hand, and lit the remaining one on the mantelpiece. "You haven't got over your adventure on the hills, I am thinking. It's made you nervous."

"Some one has been in the room while I was asleep," began Masson, in a voice which was hardly steady.

But his host answered him at once.

"Yes, I came down very soon, to tell you my girl had fallen asleep. But as you were having a nap yourself by that time, I thought it better not to disturb you, as you were going to sit up. So I went upstairs again, and waited till I heard you moving about, or rather till I heard you call out."

Although the farmer's manner and words were reassuring, Masson had the evidence of more than his eyes to counterbalance the effect of this statement. Pointing to the wet footmarks on the floor, he said:

"Those are not your footsteps, are they?"

The farmer glanced down at the wet floor, and shook his head.

"No, sir, they're not mine. By the size of them they're Merrick's."

And he went back to the door and peered into the darkness beyond. After a few moments, however, he came back into the kitchen, without having called to any one.

"He must have come through to have a peep at you, sir, out of curiosity," said he. "But, he's gone back to his own place, now, I expect, for there's no sign of him in the outhouse."

Reginald Masson was standing by the fire, with a frown of perplexity on his face. That remark of the farmer's about the size of the footmarks had engendered a fresh suspicion in his mind.

"Is the man you call Merrick," he asked,

abruptly, "ever known also by the nickname of Coch Tal?"

"Yes, sir, that's what they call him, by reason of his height and of his color," said the farmer, in some surprise at the question.

"And you are Mr. Tregaron, and this is Monachlog Farm?" went on the doctor.

"Yes, sir." The farmer stared at him with more surprise than ever, and added after a short pause: "And how did you come to hear of me, sir? Were you coming to see me? Or to see my little place?"

Masson nodded. For the moment he could do no more. Presently, when he had recovered himself a little, under the searching gaze of his astonished and puzzled host, he said:

"I was coming here to find this man Coch Tal. He was engaged by my brother, the owner of this ring," and he pointed to his finger, on which the amethyst was now placed, "to guide him over the mountains, starting from Trecoed, six weeks ago. My brother has never been heard of since."

He paused, and the farmer, who was listening with vivid interest, uttered an exclamation.

"Do you suspect Merrick, sir, of foul play of any sort?" he asked in a low voice.

"I can scarcely say I did until this afternoon," answered Masson in the same tone. "But I was naturally anxious to find him, to interrogate him, to try to get some information to put me on the track of my brother, alive or dead."

"Yes, yes, of course."

"So I started this morning for this place in order to find and question him, and chance, or rather Providence, helped me to stumble upon the very spot I wished to reach."

"Of course, you must see him at once," said the farmer, turning toward the door. But he had hardly reached it when he turned and said, in an anxious tone: "You must see him with an open mind, sir, and not think ill of him because he wouldn't come in to supper. He is a great rough oaf as ever was born, and shy of strangers always. You mustn't think that looks like guilt; that was only his awkward, country ways."

"I shall think nothing of that," returned Masson readily, "if he is willing to meet me now. But he will not be willing." He paused, while the farmer looked at him earnestly; "for he has met me already this afternoon."

"What?"

"On the road from Trecoed, soon after the snow began to fall. At the first sound of my voice he ran away, and nothing would induce him to turn again and face me."

Mr. Tregaron frowned, and presently shook his head. It was clear that this last information had awakened fears and suspicions which he had not entertained before. He began to walk quickly, with short, rapid steps, up and down the tiled floor, just as he had paced up and down the little table-land outside when Masson first met him.

Suddenly he stopped in the middle of his walk

and stared fixedly at the amethyst ring on Masson's finger. Frowning more deeply than before, he presently looked up and met his guest's eyes with the expression of one who has made a new and strange discovery.

"Was he a minister — your brother?" he asked, quickly.

"A clergyman, yes, yes."

"Then I saw him myself," said the farmer. "Merrick brought him up here; nothing would serve but he must see the ruins of the old church ——"

"Yes, yes."

"And so he did. He examined them in every part, and then Merrick set him on his way and left him."

"Left him? Is that what he said? Left him? But then, why should the man be troubled at the sight of me, at the sound of my voice, which evidently recalled my brother's to him, if he had only set him on his way safely?"

"Ah! That is more than I can tell you," said Tregaron gravely. "We must ask the man himself."

"He won't tell the truth."

"Why should he not?" retorted the farmer, with some warmth. "I don't care much for the fellow, but I have never found him dishonest. And what motive could he have for telling you lies about your brother?"

Masson was silent, but his looks betrayed the thoughts which were in his mind.

Tregaron looked at him intently with his keen black eyes.

"He never set finger on him for harm, that I'll swear," said he earnestly. "What should he do it for? Folks don't carry much of value about them when they go on the tramp among the mountains; and Merrick's been going on as ever since that time. If he'd robbed your brother, he would have gone on the spree, and we should have noticed something. Don't you see, sir?"

Before he answered, Masson happened to catch sight of the ring on his hand.

"You promised," said he, "to tell me how you came by this."

"I found it about half a mile from here, at the foot of a steep bit of rock in the side of one of the hills," replied the farmer. "It was covered with mud, and I shouldn't have seen it but I slipped on it and looked down."

"When was that?" asked Masson.

"A matter of three or four weeks back now, sir."

"You didn't remember having seen it on my brother's hand?"

"I hadn't seen it, sir. I should have remembered it if I had, being so uncommon to look at. The gentleman wore gloves, I fancy."

Masson nodded and was silent.

"I can take you to the place where I found the ring, and you can search about as much as you like. But there was no sign of any accident

there, I'm certain. Finding this thing made me keep my eyes open, you may be sure."

"If I could see this Merrick," cried Masson abruptly.

"Sir, to be sure you can. I'll go and have him out," said the farmer promptly. "I must just get my lantern; for it's some little way off; he sleeps in a loft over the cow-house. And don't be afeared, sir; we'll find out the truth of this for you, however dark it may be, and however hard we have to work to get at it. For the sake of what you're going to do for my little girl!"

As he spoke the little man put his hand up to Masson's shoulder and looked up into his face with his keen black eyes moist with feeling.

"Thank you, thank you a thousand times," said Masson huskily.

Then the farmer wrung his hand warmly and in silence, and, taking up a lantern from the corner of the dresser, lighted it, put on his coat and hat and disappeared into the darkness of the outhouse, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER VIII.

Reginald Masson stood beside the fire when Tregaron had left him, with his brain alert, but his heart sore with misgivings.

This Coch Tal, Merrick, or whatever he called himself, could tell him all that he wanted to know about Granville's fate, that was certain. What was equally certain was that he had strong reasons for holding his tongue. By what means could this man be brought to book? How could the guilt which seemed to be undoubtedly his be brought home to him?

Masson's first fear was that Coch Tal would take the farmer's questions as a warning, and that he would at once find means to escape. And at this thought he ran toward the door of the outhouse, eager to follow Tregaron and to stop the fugitive. But although he was able to stumble across the rough, encumbered floor and to open the outer door by which the farmer had passed out, he saw at once that without a lantern he could not attempt to find the traces of his host's footsteps.

The snow was still falling thickly, in small, hard flakes, that stung the flesh, while the wind, which seemed to play round the ruins from every side, roaring round the stout walls and whistling between the stone shafts of the broken

windows, whirled little clouds of dry, powdery snow like showers of spray against the sides of the farmhouse and blinded him so completely that his eyes could perceive nothing more definite than big, blurred, dark masses of what he knew to be walls on every side.

As he turned back, forced into retreat, and reflecting as he did so that even Coch Tal, hardy mountaineer that he was, would hardly dare to venture forth on such a night, a gust of wind bore men's voices to his ears. He could distinguish no words; but he fancied that the tones he heard were those of fierce reproach, and of answering sullen stolidity.

In another minute, the voices having in the meantime died down, or been borne away by the wind, two figures came suddenly upon him, and Mr. Tregaron's voice urged him to go in.

Masson and the two others got back across the floor of the outhouse, and stood, in a few seconds' time, within the kitchen. There Masson saw, to his great disappointment, that the farmer's companion was not Coch Tal, but the lad Tom, whose face wore a sullen, forbidding frown.

"He has gone away!" exclaimed Masson at once, with excitement.

"Who? Merrick? No, no," answered the farmer, with a decided shake of the head. "He knows better than to leave the shelter of a sound roof on a night like this."

"Take me to him. I want to see him now — at once," said Masson.

Again the farmer shook his head.

"I won't do that," said he. "Give the poor fellow a chance to collect his wits. He was awful upset by what I said to him." Masson frowned. "Oh, don't be afraid, sir; he has no thought of getting away. You shall see him in the morning. There's my daughter to think about now. If you're going to watch, sir, you had better go up. Or would you like a sleep first?"

"Sleep? No! I couldn't close an eye to-night," said Masson quickly. "I will go upstairs."

Recalled thus abruptly from his feverish anxiety about his brother's fate to the case he had in hand, the young doctor ascended the stairs at once to take up his self-imposed duty of watching in the sick room.

In a chair by the bedroom fire he found the old woman, wrapped to the eyes in a couple of dark check woollen shawls, staring with unblinking black eyes at the red coals. At his entrance she transferred her gaze, as before, from the fire to his face, and followed his every movement, moving her eyes without turning her head as he looked at his patient, and then took a chair in the corner of the room, whence he could watch the slightest change in her appearance or position.

The girl looked at him fixedly for a moment, and then closed her eyes with a slight, uneasy frown.

"You can go to rest now," said Masson to the

old woman. "I will watch and call you if I want you."

She stared at him while he spoke, but made no sign and uttered no word in reply. The farmer, who was still standing near the door, explained:

"She doesn't understand a word you say, sir. She talks nothing but Welsh."

And he turned to her and uttered a few guttural sounds, which, however, elicited no other reply from the old woman than the slightest possible contraction of her rugged eyebrows.

"She will sleep where she is, sir, in that chair. And if you want her, or if you wish her to take her turn in watching she will wake at the least touch," said the farmer as he held out his hand and took that of his guest in a warm, hearty, fervent pressure, which sufficiently showed the gratitude he felt toward him.

Then Tregaron retired, and Masson, from his corner, looked alternately at his patient and at the old woman.

Wake her! Would she ever sleep? This was what Masson asked himself as he remained fascinated under the piercing gaze of the unblinking black eyes, which seemed to penetrate the darkness of the corner where he sat as easily as a cat's would have done.

The girl on the sick bed was lying very still; only her short, labored breathing betrayed the fact that she was ill. Presently, however, she began to grow restless; she opened her eyes; she stared at the doctor as he approached the

bed, in a half stupid, half wondering manner; she began to mutter indistinct words, in which the name of Merrick was the one most easily distinguished.

"I never liked him!" she said at last, quite distinctly, looking up steadily at the doctor; "I never liked Merrick. He knows it. I told him so. I told him so. Whatever he says, remember that — I told him so!"

Then, suddenly, her brain grew clearer, and her eyes took the expression of fear and mistrust which had filled them on her first sight of the doctor.

He offered her some beef tea, which she took submissively, but with a look of something like suspicion in her dark eyes, as she glanced first at her grandmother and then at him.

And, suddenly, as he was feeding her, her eyes fell upon the amethyst ring.

In a moment her face became convulsed with a spasm of horror. But before he could say a word to soothe her she became calm as rapidly as she had become excited, and, closing her eyes, lay back on her pillow without a word or exclamation.

He went back to his seat very much disturbed by these things, and for some time nothing happened to divert his thoughts. The wind howled and whistled outside; the old woman kept her witch-like eyes fixed upon his corner; the girl on the bed lay quiet and seemed to sleep.

Masson sat back in his chair and pondered the strange events of the day and the singular sit-

uation in which they had placed him. There was matter for thought indeed in the developments of the past two hours, and his mind ran quickly over the points at issue, considering, selecting, devising plans for the morning's procedure.

For the moment he was lost in his reflections, when he was abruptly recalled to the life around him by a weird and uncanny incident.

He heard a sort of hiss from the bed, and, glancing quickly at his patient, he saw that she was sitting up, with her eyes fixed on her grandmother, beckoning to him silently.

He rose quietly, instinctively keeping his own eyes upon the old woman as he moved toward the bed.

The witch was asleep; or at any rate the unblinking black eyes were closed.

As he drew near the bed the girl, never once withdrawing her gaze from her grandmother's withered face, raised her head as an intimation to him to bend his toward her. By a gesture he directed her to lie down again, and, bending over her, listened to her whispered question.

"Why are you wearing my father's ring?"

Faint as was the whisper, it was imperious, not to be trifled with. As he hesitated to answer her she spoke again:

"Who do you remind me of? Why have you come here?"

There was no putting her off, and Masson answered simply, without further delay:

"I came to look for my brother, who was lost

on the mountains six weeks ago. Your father found his ring on the ground, and when I claimed it he gave it to me at once."

The girl had slowly transferred her steady gaze from her grandmother's face to his. She now stared into his eyes with an intensity which made him shiver. For a few seconds she said nothing more, but so earnest and searching was her look that Masson felt unable to withdraw from her side.

At the first movement he made as if to retire she stretched out her right hand warningly toward him and uttered these words in a terrible, deep-toned whisper:

"Don't stay here. Go. Go before morning or you will never go away again!"

CHAPTER IX.

The young doctor remained silent and still by the bedside of the sick girl for some moments after she had uttered her strange warning.

The moment the words had left her lips she had transferred her gaze back from his face to that of her grandmother, who, with eyes still closed and breath drawn as if in sleep, was sitting huddled up in her armchair, while the flickering firelight played upon her features, and caused odd shadows to cross them, so that they seemed to be twisted into a series of weird and hideous grimaces.

Then he turned to the girl and spoke in a very low voice, with soothing, grave looks and gestures.

"You must not talk, and you must not worry yourself. There is no need, believe me."

But the girl's face darkened with a look of great fear.

"I know better than you," whispered she, with a glance of warning. "You must believe me, trust me, and do as I say."

She was so much in earnest, so much excited, that there was nothing for it but to appear to fall in with her wishes.

"Very well," said he. "Since you wish it I will go."

He had not the slightest intention of keeping his word immediately, although this was the impression he wished to convey to her. But the sick girl was too shrewd and too deeply interested in the matter to be put off so easily.

She frowned, and looking once more at his face, though only for a moment, said in a stronger voice:

"Don't play with me. I understand. You are trying to deceive me; you will not go!"

Alarmed for the effect this excitement must have upon her, Masson saw at once that the girl was no fool to be calmed by a few vague words, and answered her straightforwardly and honestly.

"I promise you that I will go as soon as you are well," said he in the same low voice as before, instinctively glancing, as he spoke, at the old woman, upon whom the young girl's keen eyes were once more fixed. "And that I will take every possible precaution in the meantime. And you must keep quiet. Remember, no one will dare to lay a finger on me while I am looking after you. Your father would take care of that."

A look of intense relief and delight lit up her face at these words. She smiled, and gently moved her head in assent.

"Yes, yes, that is quite true. I had forgotten — I hadn't thought ——"

She stopped, and, even as her lips ceased to move, an expression of fear crossed her face again. She turned her eyes toward the door

and seemed to wait for something. Her ears were sharper than the doctor's, for in another moment her father's anxious face appeared from behind the screen which had been roughly improvised with some shawls and a clothes horse.

"How is she? Is she any worse? Didn't I hear her talking?" asked he as he came quickly across the room toward the doctor with that look of hungry love in his eyes as he looked at his daughter which had touched Masson on his every mention of the sick girl's name.

"She is no worse," said the doctor; "a little better if anything. The poultice I ordered has relieved the pain."

Then the girl herself spoke, looking up affectionately in her father's face.

"I am better, father," she said. "Thanks to him!"

And she glanced at Masson. The father trembled from head to foot. His little brown, eagle face twitched with the force of the emotion he felt as he stretched out his small, hard, rough, sinewy hand toward Masson across the narrow bed.

"God bless you, sir," said he, in a husky voice. "Those are the sweetest words I have heard for many a day. God bless you!"

It was he whom the doctor now had to calm. For his emotion was so strong that it threatened to break out into violent expression, disturbing to the invalid. He began to run alternately toward the bed and to the doctor with impetu-

ous relief and gratitude which would have been ludicrous but for the deep feeling which led to the child-like action. Masson laid a restraining hand on his arm, which he found to be trembling convulsively.

"Come," said he gently, "control yourself, Mr. Tregaron. This excitement is good neither for you nor for her. She must be kept quiet, very quiet, still."

The farmer glanced up at him, with tears in his eyes, shook him once more by the hand, and went quietly out of the room.

When Masson repassed the bed on his way to his chair in the corner he saw that the sick girl was lying with her eyes closed, as if trying to sleep, but he knew instinctively that this was only a blind, that her brain was working rapidly, and that she did not wish to be disturbed.

He retreated to his corner, closed his eyes, and pretended to sleep in his turn. And after a time he had the satisfaction of seeing that his patient had really fallen into a light slumber. He, from his dark corner, was able to watch so well that he knew the moment when this sleep of his patient became sound, and he was able also to note the curious circumstance that that was the exact time when the old woman by the fire opened her black eyes again.

From between his half-closed eyelids he watched her curiously.

She made no noise, no movement, as people usually do who have awakened from sound sleep. There was no change in her attitude or

in the expression of her dry little wrinkled face. Instead of the eyelids, he saw the eyes; that was all.

She looked first at the figure on the bed, always without turning her head; then at the doctor in his corner.

Then, more like a bundle of old clothes than a living, breathing woman, she slid out of her chair rather than rose from it, all without the least noise, without so much as a shuffling of the feet, and glided slowly across the floor in a straight line to the door, without so much as a moment's pause by the sick girl's bedside. In the same noiseless manner she slid around the improvised screen and disappeared from his sight.

He just saw the top of the door move, as it was opened a very little way; but every movement on the old woman's part was so entirely noiseless that he crossed the floor hastily and looked round the screen, to be quite sure that she was not still in the room.

But she was gone.

Of all the uncanny sights and sounds, words and warnings which had fallen to Masson's lot since his arrival at the farmhouse a few hours before, this disappearance of the witchlike, enigmatic person who had been his silent companion for the past three hours seemed to his excited fancy the most weird, the most alarming.

Had she been awake all the time? Had she been listening to all that passed between the

patient and himself? The keen watch kept by the sick girl herself upon the motionless figure of her grandmother seemed to warrant this suspicion. And as for the assurance he had received that the old woman understood no English, what was it worth in the midst of so much that was suspicious, mysterious and ugly?

Masson looked again at his patient, who was still sleeping peacefully, and then returned to his corner and placed himself in exactly the same position as before, with his head thrown back and his eyes half closed, that he might watch for that unknown, ugly something which he felt sure must happen as a sequel to the old woman's action.

It was about half an hour after her disappearance, and even with the fears and dangers in his mind he was growing drowsy and dull of wits, when a feeling that there was some one in the room, rather than any definite sound, made him look mistrustfully at the top of the screen.

And he saw the door open.

Without moving, he watched between his half-closed eyes and waited.

In a couple of seconds he saw the old woman, divested of her shawls and moving with the same gliding step, appear round the screen. The hand he could see, the left, she held in front of her, clutching at the empty air. With the other, which was still hidden behind the screen, she was evidently dragging some one else, some unwilling person, forward into the room.

She stopped, she turned impatiently, without

uttering a word; but her unseen companion, treading with a heavier step than hers upon one of the old boards, made it creak and rattle, and the sick girl started up from her sleep with a cry. Instantly the old woman disappeared. Masson ran to his patient, whose breath was coming quickly, and whose eyes were wide and wild with fright.

"Who was that?" cried she.

"Only your grandmother," answered Masson in a reassuring tone.

The girl stared about her, panting and trembling. Then she pointed to the screen.

"Only she? Go and see; go and see!"

He obeyed her at once, looked behind the screen and saw no one. He opened the door. Standing outside, against the wall, with her unblinking black eyes watching the handle, was the old woman, alone.

He came back into the room, and assured his patient of the fact. She lay back on her pillow, her features puckered with an expression of great uneasiness.

"You are sure she was alone?"

"Quite sure."

She drew a long sigh, and appeared to grow more satisfied.

He gave her something to drink, and resumed his watch in the corner.

Of whom was the girl afraid? Who was the unseen person, whom the old woman had tried to drag into the room, who had effected so rapid, so neat a retreat?

CHAPTER X.

Through the long hours till the morning Mason sat with tireless eyes. He had had too many alarms, too many suspicions, during the early part of the night to feel disposed for so much as a moment's rest.

Into what den of iniquity had he stumbled among those hills which the mind instinctively associated with the peaceful and innocent delights of a pastoral life? Who were they, this group of rustics in their weird eyrie, warm-hearted, impulsive farmer, witchlike old woman, sullen lad? Were they all banded together for unlawful purposes? Or were they divided sharply into two classes — the innocent and the guilty?

And what sort of a living could they hope to make by dishonest means here in the wilds, in these days of railways and the police?

The more carefully he considered the whole matter the wilder did his conjectures become, the more unlikely seemed every conclusion which suggested itself to him.

At last he gave up endeavoring to unravel the mystery, telling himself that with the morning's light, with the ability to look about him and to make inquiries, there would come saner thoughts and a clearer view of things.

In the meantime he had, at first, enough to occupy him in the condition of his patient.

Partly, no doubt, as a result of the fright she had had, the girl became more restless than before; her breathing grew more labored, her cough more incessant, her complaints of the pain it gave her more plaintive, more frequent.

With every means at his command, Masson combated each fresh symptom as it arose, administered such nourishment as she could swallow and watched with unwearied patience until, towards daybreak, she grew quieter, ceased to utter the mutterings which had denoted the uneasy state of her mind and sank into a peaceful sleep.

Masson heard the sounds about the house which told that the family were astir, long before anybody came in to relieve his watch.

When at last the farmer appeared he was overjoyed at the sight of his daughter in her quiet slumber. He wrung Masson's hand again and again; he thanked God in a broken voice for sending help when he so sorely needed it, and he ended by dragging the doctor away and leading him to the front bedroom, which had already been aired and put in order for the guest's reception.

"There, sir," he said, as he pointed to his own old-fashioned four-post bedstead, upon which a handsome quilt had been spread in honor of the visitor; "everything's ready for you to lie down and have your sleep out comfortable. I wouldn't have you called till all was ready. You'll find

breakfast waiting for you downstairs — the best we've got; and then, if you'll come up here, my mother'll watch by Gwyn to-day, and no one shall disturb the man who's saved my daughter's life."

"But we don't know ——"

"Ah, sir, don't tell me! Trust a father's eyes! She's never looked like that, peaceful and sweet and herself, since she's been ill. You've saved her, sir, under Providence you've saved my girl. And if ever there's happiness to give for a good man in this world, it ought to be yours, sir, and it should be if my prayers could bring it to you."

The impulsive fellow was shaking from head to foot again, and betraying again the depth of the emotion he felt. He seemed to want to express his gratitude in some eccentric and extravagant manner, so that Masson had an uncomfortable fear that he was going down on his knees to him, or that he would fling his sinewy arms about his guest's unwilling neck.

When he got down stairs, however, where he found a bountiful and savory meal prepared for him in the kitchen, which was flooded with the morning sun; and when the farmer had apologized for leaving him to himself, Masson wondered, with a sudden chill down the back, what would have been his treatment at the lithe little Welshman's hands if his daughter's illness, instead of taking a turn for the better, had taken a turn for the worse?

The wind had dropped; the sky, though not quite clear from clouds, was blue in parts; the

sun threw shame on the blazing fire. Masson could not open the front door for the snow with which it was blocked, but he looked out of one of the latticed windows and saw a sight grand enough to be worth his journey.

On the tableland where the farmhouse and the ruins of the old monastery stood, the snow, covering rough fragments of masonry, lay crisp and sparkling in a hundred fantastic mounds. Beyond, seen between a solitary ruined pillar on the one side and the walls of the old church on the other, was the valley below, with its dark line of rivulet winding through the cold white mass, and the mountains on the other side, where steep gray slabs and slender dark peaks relieved the veil of snow.

The whole of the wild and picturesque, if somewhat confined landscape, lay bathed in such a strong stream of flashing sunlight that it seemed to lift a great weight off the mind even to look at it; gloomy thoughts and black suspicions lost their keenness, their force, in the physical joy of existence; and Masson was conscious that the sunshine and the brightness of the scene were at the bottom of it when he made up his mind not to be frightened away by facts or by fears, but to stay on at the farmhouse till his patient was herself again, in the first place, and until he could meet with Coch Tal in the second.

As for the girl's warning to him, he told himself now that there was probably more of an invalid's fancy than of sober, solid truth in her

fears on his account. Certainly, there were mysterious elements in the household. There were suspicious circumstances to be accounted for in his own experience, as well as in his brother's fate.

But the more he considered the matter, the more firmly he set his teeth, and told himself that he would not be scared away until he had found out, if not enough to hang somebody for the crime of which he believed his brother to have been the victim, at any rate sufficient to set the police on the track of the murderer.

In the meantime he could safely trust to the farmer's interest in his daughter's welfare to protect him from the dangers which might possibly menace him under the farmhouse roof.

By the time he had finished breakfast the first impression given by the warmth and the sunlight had given place to a sense of drowsiness, a clouding of the faculties which reminded him that he had had no rest worthy of the name for twenty-six hours and that he was in such a condition as made it imperative that he should get some repose as speedily as he could.

He went upstairs, therefore, still without meeting anybody, peeped in at the door of the sick room, where the witch was sitting in her corner, and where the patient was still lying in peaceful sleep, and then locked himself into the farmer's bedroom, threw himself on the bed and sank at once into a deep slumber.

When he awoke it was dark and cold, and the wind had begun to roar again.

And some one was trying the handle of the door.

He sprang off the bed and turned the key quickly in the lock.

It was too dark to see any one, but he heard heavy footsteps going rapidly down the stairs, and he followed in hot pursuit. As soon as they reached the bottom of the stairs the foremost figure darted across the tiled floor to a door at the back, which he opened and then slammed again in Masson's face when he had passed out.

"Coch Tal!" shouted Masson, recognizing the figure by its enormous height the moment that a ray of the weak daylight enabled him to see anything at all.

And he opened the door and passed out in his turn.

Coch Tal was still in sight, leaping over the obstacles on the rough ground as nimbly as he had done the day before during that long chase among the mountains.

He turned sharply to the left behind the west wall of the ruined church, and traversing at full speed another open space beyond, ran up a rough ladder which was placed against the north wall of what had once been the hospitium and disappeared into what was now a loft over the cow-house.

Without a moment's hesitation Masson ran up the ladder in pursuit, burst open the door of the loft and found himself face to face at last with Coch Tal.

There was enough light left for him to see the

peasant's face, as he stood just inside the doorway. It was flushed, lowering, desperate. The moment he saw that his pursuer had set foot in the loft he passed him quickly, unfastened the ladder and flung it out upon the ground.

Then he folded his arms and stood towering over the other man in an attitude of sullen defiance.

And Masson saw that in one hand he held the open clasp-knife with which he had cut the cords which held the ladder in its place.

Masson drew back a step. He saw that he was caught in a trap.

CHAPTER XI.

In the first moment of surprise and alarm, on finding himself thus imprisoned by the man whose antagonism he had so much reason to dread, Reginald Masson instinctively glanced round him for some available weapon of defence.

The loft in which they both stood was long and wide and very bare, the rough stone walls being much in the same state as in the time of the monks' occupation, and the roof being of the rudest and most primitive sort.

In one corner was a small bedstead, in another was an iron washstand. This was all the furniture which could be distinguished from mere lumber.

But as Masson looked, the setting sun, which had been obscured by heavy snow clouds, struggled through the mist, and shining in through the small west window of the loft, threw into strong relief the face and figure of the angry and menacing Coch Tal.

For the first time the doctor was able to see him perfectly; and as his eyes met those of the mountaineer his fears died away.

For this wild son of the hills was no dull, brutish creature, such as he had expected to see. True it was that the animal was strong in him, betrayed in heavy jaw and full-lipped

mouth; true that the expression of his face at that moment was fierce, threatening. But in his blue eyes there was light, there was fire; they looked out upon the world with a steady, open gaze, the gaze, so it seemed to Masson, of an honest man.

All the fear of the savage mountaineer which he might have momentarily felt melted away at once as he looked at him and recognized the charm which this rugged face must have had for his ill-fated brother. It was strange that this very first look he was able to give straight into the eyes of the man he had longed so ardently to meet, gave him his first doubt as to the man's guilt.

"I am glad to meet you," he said at last, after a pause, during which they had stood steadily measuring each other, eye to eye.

Coch Tal never moved.

"Well," said he sullenly. "And what have you to say?"

He spoke in a rough voice, with a strong Welsh accent; but his tones had in them something of the strange charm of his look and manner. His defiance seemed manly, not coarsely aggressive, and his eyes still looked out steadily as an honest man's should.

There was another short pause.

"I want," said Masson at last, "to know all you have to tell about my brother."

Coch Tal frowned.

"You have heard," said he, shortly, "from Tregaron all there is to tell."

"Not all," returned Masson firmly, in a tone which showed that he did not mean to be put off. "I have heard his version, but I want to know yours. You accompanied him from Trecoed as his guide, remember that."

At this reminder Coch Tal's face flushed, and he turned angrily upon his questioner.

"What can a guide do when a man chooses to go his own way?" asked he shortly. "And for the matter of that you have no way of proving I was his guide, only my own word. He left Trecoed before me."

"But you own you caught him up, and came on with him?"

Coch Tal nodded.

"Yes, I do own that. I came on with him, up into the valley, and there he left me."

"He came up here to see the ruins. You know that."

Coch Tal stared at him with the same steady, defiant gaze.

"Did he? Tregaron must have told you that. He didn't come up with me."

"What do you mean? You must have known he came? You must have talked the matter over with Mr. Tregaron?"

"What does it matter to you what I talked about to Tregaron?" retorted Coch Tal sullenly. "A man's words in private are his own, as much as his thoughts are. All you can ask about is what I did, and what he did while he was with me. And that I'm ready to tell you."

Still, in spite of his sullenly defiant attitude,

of his rough and aggressive tone, Masson felt an instinctive liking to the man. It was all based upon what he saw, upon something indefinite in the mountaineer's personality which fascinated and charmed him. This man whom he had pursued as a wild beast, a brutal savage, from whom a guilty secret must be wrung at all costs, now exercised over him, in spite of his doubts, a mysterious charm.

For a few seconds they stood again eye to eye, each examining attentively the face of the other.

"Very well, then," said Masson at last, noting even as he uttered the words the change which had come into his own tones. "Tell me just what happened while you were together."

"In the first place," said Coch Tal, "I caught up with him about a mile from Trecoed on this side, making for the hills here."

"He had engaged you beforehand," interrupted Masson. The man gave him a quick, inquiring glance. "Oh, I know that, for he wrote to tell me so."

A slight frown crossed the face of Coch Tal, who was silent a moment, as he apparently tried to fit in this statement with the facts in his possession, and to consider it from the point of view of his own advantage. At last he said abruptly:

"Oh, he wrote that, did he? And what else did he write?"

"Not much more, beyond saying that you were to see him safe through the hills; safe, mind!"

"I saw him safe as far as I saw him at all," retorted Coch Tal, sullenly.

As there was a pause, Masson asked:

"And under what circumstances did he leave you?"

Instead of replying straightforwardly and at once, as, in spite of himself, Masson had begun to hope that he would do, Coch Tal for the first time looked at him askance, and, turning a little to the left, allowed his profile only to be seen.

"He wanted to climb where I told him there was no safe footing," he answered at last, in a slightly evasive tone.

And then he stopped.

"Well, you reasoned with him, of course? And, of course, he would trust to your experience and take your advice?"

"No, he wouldn't," retorted Coch Tal, roughly, and turning to face his questioner again. "If he had, he'd have been alive this day!"

An exclamation of horror burst from Masson's lips as he sprang forward and, regardless of the mountaineer's superior stature and of the open knife in his hand, seized him by the throat.

"Alive! He would have been alive! Then he is dead! You know it! And you know how he died! You saw him die!"

As the young doctor blurted out these short sentences, in a low, throbbing voice that seemed to come straight from his heart, the other man turned a curious purplish white, and seemed

for the moment to be stunned by this fierce and unexpected attack.

At last, however, he made a sudden effort, drew a long breath and wrenched himself out of the grasp of his companion, who, however, returned to the attack.

Then Coch Tal raised his right hand, in which was the knife he had been holding. And with his left hand he made an imperious gesture of warning.

"Don't touch me," said he hoarsely. "Don't touch me, if you're a wise man! You can squeeze lies out of a man, but the truth don't come out like that!"

Masson stepped back, and staggered, though he was not conscious of the fact.

"The truth!" gasped he, "the truth! What is the truth?"

To which Coch Tal answered, with solemn earnestness, as he dropped the hand which held the knife, and raised the other higher in the air:

"That, sir, neither you nor me will ever know while the breath remains in our bodies."

His earnestness made so great an impression upon Masson, excited as the latter was, that he made no immediate retort or inquiry. But after a few moments of uncanny silence, he said, in a low voice:

"Can you expect me to be content with that? You have told me nothing, nothing. But you know more."

"Not much more," retorted Coch Tal grimly. "But I can make a guess. And if you'll come

with me, you'll be able to do as much yourself. Your brother, as you may say he was — the clergyman — left me in the valley to climb up this hill by a way I told him was not safe. I never saw him again."

"But Mr. Tregaron saw him after that?"

"So he says. But I know nothing of that. I can only tell you what I know, what I saw," retorted Coch Tal stubbornly.

There was always behind the man's strangely honest and reassuring manner this suspicious, undoubted reticence.

"And that was the last you did see of my brother — dead or alive?"

"That was the last I saw of him, dead or alive."

"Yet you took it for granted he was dead! How was that?"

The man was silent.

"Had you any reason to suspect foul play?"

"No more than when a man who can't swim throws himself into the sea where it's ten fathom deep," responded Coch Tal grimly.

"You mean that when he left you, you never expected to see him alive again?"

"I may say I do mean that, aye, I may say that, sir."

There was a terrible pause.

"In fact, you gave him up for dead when, in spite of all your warnings, he persisted in having his own way and in going up in spite of you?"

"Aye, I may say that."

"Yet, when you missed him, when he never came back, you did not even look for his body?"

After a moment's silence Coch Tal uttered a short laugh.

"I don't think, sir, as you quite understand," said he in a grave tone. "This place isn't London, and the mountain ways aren't quite the same as your paved streets. Come with me."

Although the ladder by which they had both ascended into the loft had been thrown down, there was another way out. Coch Tal pulled a piece of tarpaulin away from a square hole in one corner of the floor and revealed another ladder, more rickety than the outer one, by which he proceeded to descend into the cow-house below.

Masson followed. The beasts, whose near presence had been abundantly evident even in the loft above, turned their heads to look at the stranger, and then went on chewing their cud at their stalls.

When they got out in the open air, the sun was so near his setting that only a few red rays came struggling through the hills, dimmed by the gathering clouds. Coch Tal glanced up, and pointed with his thumb.

"There'll be more snow before morning," said he.

Then he led the way among more fragments of the ruined buildings, to a bit of smoother ground beyond, which sloped gently upward. It was all one undulating white sheet, untrodden by any footsteps but their own.

Masson had begun to speak, asking some further questions about his brother, when Coch Tal, who was now walking by his side, called out, in a warning voice:

"Take care, sir."

And then Masson turned sick, and almost giddy, as he fell back a step.

For not many inches from his feet he suddenly perceived a narrow chasm, not more than five or six feet across at the top, but some fifty or sixty feet deep. It was hollowed out and half choked with snow. And at the bottom, foaming and swirling among sharp-pointed green and gray rocks, ran a mountain stream, milk-white with froth and foam.

"Here's one place," went on Coch Tal, energetically, "where a stranger might come by his death without a moment's warning. And I can show you a dozen such. There's been four men lost in these hills since I've lived here, that's seven years. And only one of them's ever been found. And if you want to know where they're lying you must dredge Llyn Foel. And that's bottomless, so they say!"

And, grimly shrugging his shoulders, Coch Tal turned away, and Masson shuddering with ugly fears, followed him.

CHAPTER XII.

The sight of the chasm, sprung upon his vision so unexpectedly, had had so great an effect upon Masson that at first he was inclined to take the view suggested by Coch Tal, and to believe that his brother had met with his death in some rash exploration, undertaken at his own risk and against the advice of his guide.

Granville, though frail of physique, had been stubborn of purpose, difficult to advise or to lead. But then, on the other hand, there had never been in his character any taste for wild or rash adventure; he, in his delicate state of health, was the last person who could have been expected to lose his life in a mad attempt to climb to an inaccessible rock or to dash forward with such precipitancy as to lose sight of the fact that a chasm lay across his proposed path.

Besides, the farmer had said distinctly that Granville had come up to explore the ruins, and then that Merrick had "set him on his way."

And was it conceivable that a guide would warn a man that the path he was taking was unsafe, and then shrug his shoulders and leave him, and then trouble himself no further as to what had become of his companion?

He turned, at this point in his thoughts, abruptly to Coch Tal.

"So, when you saw him attempt to climb a path you knew to be unsafe, you went on your way and never tried to find out how he fared?"

Coch Tal frowned uneasily, and again looked at his questioner askance.

"I was only a paid guide and had to take it I was dismissed when he sent me away, sir," said he.

"And you didn't watch him as he went?"

"I did. I watched him out of sight. And then he was safe, safe, I tell you."

"And can you show me the way by which he went?"

"I could, I can — as soon as the snow's cleared away."

"And this was after he had been up to explore the ruins?"

Coch Tal hesitated.

"I suppose it was," he said at last.

Masson did not question him again. He saw that it was useless to hope to get at the truth among these people, who told him different and inconsistent stories, who evaded inquiries which they did not choose to answer, whose one object in speaking seemed to be to throw a mist of doubt and uncertainty about every fact. Before such a determination to hide the truth as he seemed to feel everywhere around him he felt that he was powerless.

They had reached the back of the farmhouse before either of them spoke again.

Then Masson saw Coch Tal glance up at the drawn curtains of Gwyn's sick room.

"I must go upstairs now," said the doctor, "and see how my patient is."

Coch Tal frowned.

"She's better, they tell me," said he shortly.

"Yes, she has had some sleep," answered the doctor.

He entered the house, and Coch Tal followed, with the same sullen and menacing manner. Just as the doctor reached the foot of the stairs Coch Tal spoke again:

"How long are you going to stay here, sir?"

Masson hesitated.

"Until she is out of danger," said he at last.

"Is it her wish that you should stay?"

Surprised by the question, Masson looked at him scrutinizingly by the faint light of a smoky little lamp which was nailed against the wall. There was eager interest in the man's face, and something like menace in his tone.

"No," said Masson. "It is her father's wish." Coch Tal looked relieved, but still somewhat suspicious. "The girl herself told me to go away."

"She told you that?"

"Yes."

"Then I should go, if I were you," retorted Coch Tal grimly.

At that moment the farmer came out of one of the rooms above, and called to Masson to come and see his daughter. His tone was jubilant and eager. Coch Tal withdrew noiselessly and at once, and disappeared by the back door as Masson went upstairs.

He and Tregaron entered the sick room together.

The patient was better; there was no doubt of that. She had had more sleep during the day; her temperature had gone down; the cough was less frequent, less painful. The doctor, at whom she smiled, but to whom she scarcely spoke, turned to the farmer with a reassuring look.

"She will do, now, with care," said he. "She must be kept quiet, and well nursed. But the worst of the trouble is over."

"Then you can go away, doctor," said the girl, speaking out with unexpected strength and energy. "You had better return home at once and relieve your friends' anxiety."

The farmer and Masson smiled at each other.

"Seems very anxious to be rid of you, sir," said Tregaron. "It's rather ungrateful, ain't it?"

But she frowned slightly, and again insisted on Masson's going, so that to pacify her he said at once that he should start as early as he could on the following morning.

"That's a promise," said she eagerly.

"Yes, a promise."

Satisfied with this answer, she closed her eyes again, and the doctor withdrew with his host.

"I can't thank you, sir, I can't thank you, not if I was to live one hundred years," said Tregaron. "You just come in the nick of time, that you did; sent by Providence, that you were! But if there was anything I could do for you ——"

"There is," cut in Masson, quickly. "I want

the mystery about my brother cleared up. You can help me in that, Mr. Tregaron; you can get at the truth, if any man can. I have seen your man Merrick ——”

“You’ve seen him?” asked the farmer, with astonishment and interest.

“Yes; but I can get nothing out of him; nothing at all.”

“Ah! Well, you’d better leave it to me. I’ll leave no stone unturned to find out something, in gratitude for what you’ve done for me and mine, sir. And if you’ll write me down your address, I’ll send to you if I hear anything, or if I find anything.”

With this promise Masson was fain to be content. He began to feel as anxious to go away as Gwyn was that he should go. For he saw that, whatever was to be discovered, he would have to get outside help; and he proposed to put the matter without delay into the hands of the police.

Gwyn would not hear of his sitting up that night, so he lay on one of the beds in the front room, while the farmer slept in the other. But the fact that he had slept through the day, and perhaps a certain vague, but justifiable, feeling of insecurity, prevented his closing his eyes.

When the farmer rose, at 4 o’clock in the morning, and went softly downstairs without disturbing his guest, Masson sprang up and looked out of the window.

And with deep misgiving he saw that the snow was falling faster than ever.

When he got downstairs in his turn, he found the lad Tom in the kitchen, looking as sulky as ever, and rubbing his hands before the fire.

"You'll have to put off your journey back, sir," said he with an unprepossessing grin, as Masson went quickly to the window, which was almost blocked up from the outside. "We're snowed up."

The doctor uttered an exclamation of dismay.

Upon his spirits there fell like a leaden weight the conviction that he was in a prison from which he would never get out alive.

CHAPTER XIII.

When Reginald Masson went upstairs to pay his morning visit to the invalid he found her sitting up in bed, supported by pillows, staring out through the window which was opposite to her at the falling snow.

She looked uneasy and distressed.

"What is this?" she asked, as soon as he entered the room. "They say we're snowed up! If so, you won't be able to get away!"

"Not to-day, I'm afraid," said he. "But I'm not in such a hurry to go. I would rather see you about first."

She looked at him earnestly. In this, the first sight he had had of her face in a natural position, Masson was struck by its beauty of feature. Refined by illness, her face had lost the ruddy brown of the peasant's healthy skin and looked delicately transparent. Her large, dark eyes had in them a plaintive expression of anxiety which gave them an unusual depth and brilliancy. Her magnificent black hair, no longer confined in the formal coil of tight plaits which she wore when in health, was just loose enough to give a softening effect to her whole face.

If he had seen her first at work about the house or on the farm, with her sleeves rolled up, wearing her natural expression of busy inter-

est about household trifles, Masson would have passed no other comment on her than would be expressed in the remark that she was a fine girl.

As it was, however, she had for him all the interest of a beautiful woman met under romantic and singular circumstances. He was interested in her, touched by her evident concern on his account.

"Where have you come from?" she asked shortly. "Not Wales?"

"I come from London."

"Ah! That was where your brother came from!"

"You saw him?" asked Masson eagerly.

She threw at him a frightened glance, which woke his interest anew.

"No."

"But you heard of his coming?" pursued he quickly.

Again, to his impatience and disgust, he saw in this charming, attractive girl the same ugly reticence which had characterized Coch Tal's every mention of his brother.

"I heard of a clergyman's coming to see the ruins," she answered stiffly, as if measuring out her words.

And as she spoke, she settled herself down among her pillows, and closed her eyes, as if the exertion of sitting up had tired her. But he knew that this fatigue was only assumed, and he asked her another question, in a low voice, earnestly. They were alone together for the first time; the grandmother, whose presence

acted like an evil spell upon Masson, was for once out of the way. Such an opportunity was not to be lightly missed.

"If you know anything, tell me," said he imploringly, in a voice which shook with the emotion he felt. "Nobody will tell me anything. But I must know."

How paltry her excuse of apparent fatigue was became in an instant abundantly evident. She flashed her great eyes at him, and repeated quickly, in the low voice she had used all the time:

"Must know! What do you mean by that? Is it a threat?"

"No," answered he passionately. "It is — an entreaty."

There was a silence. She closed her eyes again; and presently he saw rolling from under her eyelids two tears, which slowly trickled down to her pillow. Masson bit his lip. He felt that he was a brute to disturb her at such a time; and yet he knew that the agitation from which she was suffering could hardly be increased by anything he could say.

Again there was silence. The big snowflakes fluttered steadily past the window, darkening it as they fell; the fire hissed in the grate. Presently the girl turned her head.

"There is some one at the door," said she, in a whisper. "See who it is."

Masson crossed the floor very quickly, threw open the door and discovered Coch Tal standing close behind. The peasant's face wore an

ugly, threatening look, as he met the eyes of the doctor.

"So, you're not going, sir, after all?" said he, in a strongly ironical tone.

"I'm going the moment I can do so," returned Masson. "At present I'm told it is impossible to leave the house."

"Impossible! Yes. Especially for them as aren't in the mood to go," retorted Coch Tal fiercely.

Masson, afraid that the man's angry and aggressive tones would reach Gwyn's ears and alarm her, closed the door of the room, shutting himself and his companion out.

"Do you doubt that I want to get away?" asked he quietly.

"Doubt it? Yes, I do. I doubt your wanting to get away from her!"

And he jerked his head violently in the direction of the room where the sick girl was lying.

Jealous! thought Masson, with his eyes suddenly opened.

And at once he set about allaying the excited lover's fears.

"I should certainly not have cared to go or have been willing to go while my patient was in any danger," he answered in solemn, professional tones; "but I am happy to say there is nothing more to fear. Pneumonia is an illness which leaves one in no doubt when the crisis is past. She is mending rapidly, and now only wants ordinary care, not skilled attendance. Now are you satisfied?"

Apparently, Coch Tal was not. In the dim light of the stairhead, where there was scarcely room for them to stand without touching each other, he went on staring scrutinizingly in the face of the doctor.

"Are you a married man, sir?" he asked at last, abruptly enough.

"No, not yet; but I hope to be one soon," answered Masson with a smile.

"You hope to be married soon? You are engaged to be married?" went on the peasant inquisitorially.

"And may I venture to inquire what business it is of yours?" said Masson, not ill-humoredly, but with a strong sense that the line must be drawn somewhere between natural interest and impertinent curiosity.

"Well, sir, it's just this way," retorted Coch Tal in a surly tone, "that a man whose heart's full of one woman, if he's the right sort, don't go troubling his head about another. And so, if you're thinking of the lady you're going to marry, you won't maybe trouble your head about Gwyn Tregaron. But if you're not engaged to another woman, and if you're going to hang about here another week or so, looking after her and showing off your fine London airs to her, and making her think her own folks aren't good enough for her," pursued Coch Tal, clenching his hands with passion and speaking in hoarse gasps, "why, then, Mr. Doctor, you stand a fine chance of never getting back to your London sweetheart at all, and so I tell you."

From all he heard and all he saw, it seemed to Masson himself that his chance of getting back to London, sweetheart or no sweetheart, was so poor already that a difficulty or a danger in the way more or less hardly mattered. He was able, therefore, to reply with apparent equanimity:

"You are troubling yourself very unnecessarily, my friend. Just ask yourself whether a man who has a great grief and burden on his mind, as I have, is likely to have much time or thought to give to lovemaking! And whether, if he had, he would have much opportunity for it, in a place as full of inquisitive eyes and ears as this house seems to be!"

Coch Tal was silent for a few moments. The doctor spoke again.

"And where is your own pride, your own spirit," he went on, "to think you could be cut out so easily?"

But at that the great peasant gave a long, shivering sigh, and seemed to drop at once into a state of absolute dejection and humility.

"That's it!" said he, in a husky whisper. "That's the worst of it. It 'ud be easy enough for any one to cut me out — easy enough! But it would be a bad job for him to try, all the same."

He ground out the words between his clenched teeth, and glared again menacingly at the doctor.

At that moment there was a knock at the wall, and he started back.

"She wants — you!" said he, in a sullen tone.

"The poor girl is naturally curious at all this growling and whispering that's going on outside her door," returned Masson coolly. "I'll tell her you've come to inquire how she is."

"Aye, tell her that," said Coch Tal, with a yearning look at the walls of the sick room, as the doctor opened the door and went in.

"Has he gone?" asked the invalid, forming the words with her lips rather than uttering them, and speaking with an expression of fear on her pale face.

"Not yet. He has come to know how you are. Shall I take him a message?"

She frowned and shook her head. The doctor insisted.

"Yes," he urged gently, "you had better. A kind message. He is very anxious about you."

A light seemed to cross her face as a new thought came into her mind.

"Tell him," she said in a low voice, "that I am worse this morning, much worse."

The doctor stared.

"But I cannot tell him that," he protested. "You are much better. I have already told him so."

But Gwyn moved her right hand impatiently among the bedclothes. Evidently she was a young woman of strong will, who did not speak without intention.

"If you don't give him my message," said she, with some energy, "as I gave it to you, and in my hearing, I will make myself worse in spite of you!"

She glanced imperiously at the screen, to inti-

mate that he was to obey her injunction at once. Much bewildered, Masson went again to the door and, opening it, spoke in a voice which the girl could hear.

"She fancies she is not so well this morning," said he; "but I hope that it is nothing more than fancy."

Coch Tal received this message in silence and with a frown. Then he retreated down the stairs without any other answer than a nod, while Masson returned to the invalid.

"Is he gone?" asked she.

"Yes."

The girl drew a sigh of relief.

"Why do you tease him? It is not worthy of a good woman to tease the man who loves her," said Masson, who had been touched by the rough devotion of the huge son of the hills, by the savage vehemence of his protests, by the gloomy surliness with which he had slunk away on receiving Gwyn's message.

"Because," replied the girl in an agitated whisper, "I hate the very sound of his footsteps. I hate and I fear him — more than I can tell. And don't — don't ask me why."

Her brows contracted, and the shadow of a great and awful grief passed over her face.

Masson stood beside her in silence. What was he to do? He felt that the key to the secret he was trying to pierce was in this young girl's keeping. Yet he could not worm from her the truth which would be ruin to her lover, to her brother, or at any rate to some of her own people, her own kin!

CHAPTER XIV.

He was startled by seeing the girl open her eyes suddenly, and fix upon him an expression of eager curiosity and interest.

"Tell me, sir," said she abruptly, "something about yourself and your brother. Or is it too painful?"

"It will be painful for you to hear, I am afraid."

"No, no," said she quickly, "I don't care if it is painful, if you do not mind. I want to hear about something interesting, very interesting, so that I can forget — other things!"

And again a spasm of pain and distress crossed her face.

Although the doctor would rather have left the girl to quiet repose, he thought it better to obey her than to let her remain a prey to the distressing thoughts which were evidently disturbing her mind. He sat down therefore in a chair at a little distance from her, from which he could see the snow falling outside and watch her face at the same time; and he talked to her in a quiet voice, telling her such anecdotes of his own boyhood and his brother's as he thought might interest and divert her, and marvelling the while at the strange series of adventures which had brought him to this singular situation.

104 The House in the Hills

The girl listened until his voice and the soft crooning of the rising wind sent her to sleep.

Then Masson rose from his seat and went quietly out of the room and down the stairs. In the kitchen he found the old woman, who vouchsafed no salutation in answer to his, but went on with her work of scrubbing down the table with the mechanical ease given by long practice.

He wondered whether he was in the way, but was unable to make the suggestion. Not even a look or a smile did she accord him, but went on with her occupation as if he had been part of the furniture.

When she had finished the scrubbing of the table she took up her pail and retreated into the washhouse at the back without the least acknowledgment of Masson's courtesy in opening the door for her. The doctor hovered between the belief that she was half-witted and the fancy that she was the incarnate spirit of evil.

Left thus to himself, without even a book to occupy his time — for the whole library of the household, marshalled on the top of a cupboard in a corner, consisted of a Bible in Welsh, an old illustrated family Bible with the Apocrypha; a Moody and Sankey hymn book, two more hymn books, "The Pilgrim's Progress," Baxter's "Saints Everlasting Rest," and an odd volume of somebody's "Sermons." Masson, who became more uneasy and anxious to get away with each succeeding hour, tried the front door, but without success. He managed to open it,

indeed, but finding himself brought face to face with a wall of snow which he could not even look over, he had to close it again immediately.

One of the windows was completely blocked up and the other was only partially clear. He went into the big, bare outhouse at the side, where he heard the footsteps of some one moving about. It proved to be Tom, who started forward with a scared face on being disturbed.

"Hallo!" said Masson, holding the door open, as he looked in; for the place was lighted only by a skylight, which was now blocked with the snow; "you look as if I startled you. Can you give me a spade and let me help you? I'm dying for something to do."

Instead of answering, the rough lad passed his right hand across his brow, and Masson saw, with surprise, that he was shaking like a leaf, while the sweat stood out in glistening beads on his face.

"Why," pursued the doctor, "you look warm, I declare. It's a sensation I should be very glad of, I can tell you! Let me have your spade, and tell me what to do. I can handle one, I assure you."

But the lad drew back, trembling and shaking his head.

"No, no," said he hoarsely, stepping back quickly, and waving the other away with his spade, "no, no, it's not work for you, mister. Get you back in there and shut the door. Get you back, I say."

He seemed to be terror-stricken, unable to go

106 The House in the Hills

on with his work. Masson, curious, and anxious to have some conversation with this, the only member of the household with whom he had hardly come in contact, put a brick against the kitchen door to keep it open, and advanced across the rough floor of the outhouse.

Whereupon Tom, without a moment's delay, flung down his spade, gave each of his shoes a sharp kick against the wall, ran across the floor past Masson, and traversing the kitchen with rapid steps, disappeared into the washhouse, banging the door behind him.

There was not much light in the outhouse, and Masson stumbled as he made his way across the rough, encumbered ground. By the time the lad had begun to run Masson had all but reached him, and had had to step aside in order that the spade should not fall on his toes.

In doing so, he stepped upon a loose board, which shifted under his feet, and caused him to stumble and fall. His right hand slipped between the board which had moved and one which lay alongside.

He regained his feet quickly, with a shudder and a shout. For his hand had grasped nothing but empty air.

As soon as he recovered his footing he stooped down, and found that the boards upon which he had stepped had been laid across a hole in the floor about four feet across, the mouth, so he supposed, of a well. But it was too dark for very close investigation.

By the side of this covered hole there was a

little mound of some white substance, chalk or lime, as he supposed, and in a corner of the out-house there was another and much larger white heap. Tom had apparently been engaged in carrying the white substance from the heap in the corner to the heap by the hole in the floor.

This was the result of Masson's investigations, when he found the light from the doorway blocked out by a human figure, and, turning, found that the old woman was looking in at him.

Now although he was in such deep shadow that to an ordinary eye he would have been unseen, Masson either knew or fancied that the old woman could see him as well as if she had been in the broad light of the sun. She stood for a few seconds without uttering a word, and when he advanced toward her, impatient of that ugly, crooked figure silhouetted against the dim light, with the unblinking black eyes fixed, as he felt, upon him, she gave forth the first sound he had ever heard from her lips, a harsh, faint, croaking chuckle, which was a very mockery of laughter.

Masson turned colder than he was before, and, springing past her into the warm kitchen, drew a long breath of relief.

There was another ugly moment to be laid in his record of his time at the farmhouse. Wet and cold from head to foot, he fell into a chair.

CHAPTER XV.

What he suspected Masson scarcely knew. But it was not only the shock of having found himself in a position of unexpected danger which caused him to be seized with a sensation of sickness and giddiness, as he staggered to one of the kitchen armchairs and sat down in it, trembling all over.

What was the nature of the work on which Tom had been engaged? Why had he been so much disturbed by Masson's appearance? Was there some ghastly connection between the hidden pit or well in the outhouse, the digging out of the lime, and the doctor himself?

The suspicion, although it seemed to him absurd even while it crossed his mind, took hold of him in spite of himself; and at the same time he began to entertain, for the first time, an idea which appeared to offer a solution to some of the perplexing problems presented by the singular household at the farmhouse.

Was there some sort of secret and evil league between the old woman and her grandson Tom?

They were the only two persons about the place who were entirely unsympathetic to Masson, and he acknowledged to himself that this fact probably prejudiced him. But, all the same,

the suspicion, once formed in his mind, grew stronger every moment.

It was from the outhouse into which Tom had disappeared on the first evening of the doctor's arrival that the footsteps had come of the person or persons who had searched his pockets. And it was the old woman who had tried to drag some one into Gwyn's room when the doctor was supposed to be fast asleep in the corner. Was that unseen person the lad Tom? And had their object been robbery — and something worse?

The more he thought about this the more likely did his hypothesis seem to grow. Coch Tal was at least, though professedly antagonistic to Masson, an open, and even a manly foe. The farmer himself had behaved straightforwardly throughout; he had treated his guest with consideration and gratitude; and on the night they had passed in the same room, during which Masson had watched him with steady, sleepless eyes, he had slept a sound and peaceful slumber until morning, evidently undisturbed by plots, secret plans, or coward's fears.

Besides, Masson, who, like most other people, believed himself to be something of a physiognomist, had from the first been predisposed against the lad Tom on account of his hangdog looks, his sullen manner and the repellent, lowering shyness which caused him to avert his eyes the moment the stranger looked in his direction.

While Tregaron himself showed his heart on

110 The House in the Hills

his sleeve, was angry at one moment, impulsively grateful the next, his son, on the other hand, had never changed his sulky look, except when he had been discovered at his digging in the darkness of the outhouse.

As these thoughts passed quickly through his mind Masson saw the old woman, after a little delay, come in from the outhouse, closing the door behind her.

She cast at him one glance, in which malevolence and suspicion were easy to read, and went through the kitchen as silently as ever. Masson heard her go upstairs, and a few minutes later Tom came down with rapid, heavy footsteps, and burst into the kitchen with a scared face.

"Doctor, you're wanted; Gwyn wants you," stammered he. "She's took ill again, very ill. Be quick, be quick, or I'm afeared something will happen to her."

Masson hurried upstairs. The door of the sick room was wide open, and the old woman, with her arms folded, was standing passive, enigmatical as ever, in the middle of the floor.

The sick girl was lying on her side, panting and gasping for breath. At the sight of the doctor she uttered a cry, and beckoned him toward her.

"Doctor," she said, not in the feeble voice he might have expected, but clearly and firmly, "I'm ill again, I think. Tell me, if you can, what's the matter with me."

But this was not easy. He felt her pulse; he

looked at her; he asked her some questions. How did she feel? In pain? In discomfort?

Her answers puzzled him. She said she thought she was going to "have her illness again." She felt uncomfortable, restless; she had a worse pain at her chest than ever. And her hands and head were so hot; she was feverish again, she was sure.

So he took her temperature, and found it normal.

"It is all nothing but fancy," said he at last, smiling at her fears. "You are going on as well as you possibly can; you have nothing to do but to keep quiet, and you will be quite well in no time. If you go on as you are doing you might get up for a little while the day after to-morrow."

But she shook her head.

"I am not so well as you think," said she obstinately. "Do you think I can't tell whether I'm getting better or not? I tell you I feel dreadfully ill, as if I were going to die!"

Again she lay back and closed her eyes. Masson was rendered rather nervous and uncomfortable by the presence of the old grandmother, who never once changed her position during this scene, but stood on the same spot, like a malevolent witch, watching them with her bead-like eyes. In the circumstances, it was difficult to speak as cheerily to the patient as he would have liked to do.

"Oh, no, no, you are not going to die!" said he promptly. "I never saw any one who looked

112 The House in the Hills

less like dying than you do. You have been worried, perhaps, or you have had a fright."

By the spasm which contracted her features as he made this suggestion, he saw that he had probably hit upon the truth. He glanced at the old woman with a frown.

"Is it your grandmother or your brother who has been frightening you?" asked he abruptly.

But the girl did not answer.

"I shall have to speak to your father," he said, with decision.

At these words Gwyn suddenly opened her eyes again.

"Yes," said she. "We will speak to my father. I will speak to him."

She addressed a few words, querulously, in Welsh, to her grandmother, who, without making any reply, went out of the room. Then she lay with closed eyes until a few minutes later, her father came into the room, looking anxious and distressed.

"What's this, Gwyn, my girl? What's this I hear? That you're ill again?"

He came close up to the bedside, taking one of the girl's hands in his, and looking into her face with eyes full of tender, yearning affection.

"Yes, father, I'm not so well to-day," said Gwyn, drawing a breath which seemed to be labored.

The farmer glanced suspiciously at Masson.

"Doctor, what's this?" he asked, sharply.

"She don't look so ill, nor yet talk as weak as

she did! What's this that's come to her? Can't you explain it? What does it mean, sir?"

"She has been worried, alarmed, by some one," said Masson.

The farmer frowned, and Gwyn glanced from him to the doctor.

"I want," said she, in a voice which now began to tremble a little, "to speak to my father."

Masson proceeded to withdraw, but reluctantly. The girl was evidently exciting herself much more than was prudent. He gave a warning glance at Tregaron.

"Don't let her talk much," said he. "And don't let her excite herself."

It was only too evident, however, that the interview between father and daughter would be of a harassing nature; for the farmer had begun to shake and quiver, as he looked with curiosity and suspicion first at Gwyn and then at the doctor.

Masson left them together.

About twenty minutes later Tregaron came downstairs into the kitchen, looking sullen and gloomy. Masson met his eyes with a questioning glance.

"She's full of fancies," said the farmer shortly, "mad fancies as ever came into a lass's head. You'll have to give her a quieting dose, sir, or we shall have her ill again, sure enough. And Tom mustn't go near her, he must understand that; he bounces into the room, like the great gawk he is, and makes her jump like so she

114 The House in the Hills

thinks all sorts of wild things, all sorts of wild things!"

And as he repeated these words, Tregaron fixed upon his guest eyes which were full of conjecture, and doubt, and eager scrutiny.

Masson wondered what the communication was which his daughter had made to him. Was it some hint of an ugly plot which Tom, in a panic, had communicated to his sister? Was it something about the well in the outhouse? He was about to put a question to the farmer concerning that adventure of his, when Tregaron said simply:

"She wants to see you again, sir, I think!"

And then he took up his hat and disappeared into the washhouse.

But Masson ran after him.

"You are hard at work, aren't you, clearing away the snow between this and the cowhouse?"

"I believe you! Merrick and me and Tom have got our work cut out. We've got to get to the sheep, if we can, and save 'em, if we can. As hard work as ever we've had in our lives!"

All the more singular, surely, that Tom should have been spared for that mysterious work in the outhouse!

"Tom!" repeated Masson quickly. "He was at work indoors just now, by the side of an old well or something of the kind. I stepped upon the boards which cover it, and nearly fell through."

The farmer shook his head warningly.

"Dear, dear," he said, with much concern,

"you shouldn't go walking about this crazy old place by yourself, sir. There's pitfalls and traps for careless feet all over the place. That was not a well, sir, but a way by which they used to haul up provisions and such like, in the old monks' days. I'll show it to you some time, sir; it's a bit of a curiosity, is that."

"Indeed, I should like to see it. And in the meantime I hope you will accept me as a volunteer, to help you with your digging."

"No, no, sir; that's no work for you. If you'll take care of my daughter and save her from fretting herself into a fever, that's what I want of you."

"But I could do both! I could take a hand with a spade and go and see her from time to time as well."

"All right, sir. You may do that if you like."

With this arrangement concluded, Masson left the farmer, and, returning once more to the sickroom, informed the girl of the plan he had formed with her father. To his surprise, she energetically forbade him to carry it out.

"I'm much worse than you think, any of you," said she; "and I want to live, for the sake of — my father. I'm afraid of the night, of the night. I'm afraid I shall get restless and feverish then, and perhaps be lightheaded like and wandering in my mind. So I want you, sir, to go and rest now, while they're all out there digging, and then you will be fresh to watch me at night."

"But I assure you, Miss Tregaron, you no

more need watching at night now than I do myself. If your grandmother sleeps in the room with you, surely you will feel safe and be able to rest yourself."

But the girl was obstinate, determined.

"I know better than you," she said, stubbornly. "My grandmother goes off into such a sound sleep that there would be no waking her, however ill I might be!"

This statement, being in direct opposition to his own experience of the old lady, astonished Masson. The girl went on:

"And I feel certain I shan't be able to sleep at all to-night."

"Oh, yes, you will. If you find yourself uneasy toward night, I can give you a sleeping draught ——"

But she raised both her hands in energetic protest.

"No, no," said she, "I will not have it. You must promise me, sir, that, whatever happens, you will not give me one. Promise, promise, or if not I will refuse to take either food or medicine."

Decidedly this was the most obstinate patient he had ever had, so the young doctor thought, as he found himself compelled to give the required promise.

CHAPTER XVI.

Masson was much annoyed with Gwyn for extorting from him such conditions. He felt like a fool as he went downstairs, opened the door of the washhouse, and making his way to the farmer between two high built-up walls of snow, told him, with much vexation, of the girl's whim.

Tregaron heard him in silence, and shrugged his shoulders sullenly. Coch Tal, who was working with Tom within hearing, leaned on his spade to listen to the doctor's account, which he received with a derisive laugh.

"Won't let you help with the digging, won't she?" said he in a jeering tone. "She can be thoughtful for some folks, for sure!"

The farmer silenced him immediately.

"If's she got a fancy we must humor her, I suppose, eh, sir? But to be sure she's not at all like our Gwyn when she's well!"

"Well, we may compound with our consciences," said Masson, as he seized a spade which lay near him. "She's not so ill as she imagines, nor in so much danger of a bad night as she believes. I can take a hand with you, and look in at her now and then, and if she still has the fancy to-night that we must sit up with her, we must all take a turn at it, that's all!"

On the next occasion of his visiting the sick room Masson found the girl silent and sullen. She had heard his voice outside and knew that he had been working with the others.

"I told you to rest," she said peremptorily, "and you had better have done so. For you will have to sit up to-night all the same."

She persisted in this whim and, in spite of her father's remonstrances, she made the doctor and her grandmother watch during the whole of that night, although it was clear to everybody that there was no further need for such a precaution. Masson got what sleep he could in the armchair, quite satisfied that there was no need for him to keep awake. And in the morning, when he found her still on the high road to complete recovery, with a good pulse and a normal temperature, he laughed at her fancies and tried to tease her out of them.

But she was just as rigid in her attitude as on the preceding day.

"If I fancy I am going to be very ill," persisted she, "and if I fancy also that I am going to be neglected and left to myself, it is just as bad for me as being really very ill."

"I promise you," said Masson kindly, "that you shall neither be neglected nor left alone, however wild your fancies may seem to us."

She flashed up into his face a sudden look of gratitude and pleasure which touched him strangely. In spite of the whimsicality of her caprices, or perhaps indeed partly on account of them, he found his interest in his patient increase

with every hour. The mystery which hung about her and about the household to which she belonged, the earnestness and passion which he had discovered in even so short and restricted an acquaintance, all helped to make an impression upon him to which her personal beauty helped to give both power and charm.

There had come to be a strange sort of freemasonry between these, too, expressed in an exchange of looks when he came in or went out, of confidence on the one hand, of sympathy on the other.

Whatever there might be amiss in the household — and that something was wrong somewhere Masson could not doubt — this one figure of the handsome, open-faced girl stood aloof from it, shone out the brighter for her rather dubious surroundings. He was not without a suspicion, too, that this insistence of hers upon his constant presence in the sick room was a measure of precaution for his personal safety, and that the watching at night, upon which she continued to insist, was a manœuvre by means of which she could still play the part of guardian angel during the hours which she judged to be the most perilous to him.

However that might be, for the next four days, during which the doctor assured her that her progress toward recovery was steady, while she insisted that it was slow, Gwyn proved herself a most obstinate and refractory convalescent, refusing to sit up or to rise on the plea of weakness, and demanding constant attention by

day, and the watching of her grandmother and the doctor at night.

As Masson continued to help with the work of snow-clearing by day, and thus got no proper rest, he had become, on the fourth successive night of his forced and unnecessary watch, so utterly worn out by fatigue that he fell into a deep, dead sleep as soon as he had settled himself in his armchair.

He was awakened, after a short, wild nightmare of a dream that he was drowning, suffocating, crying for help, to find himself bound, gagged, blinded, and gasping for air. He was being lifted by the shoulders and by the heels, when he awoke. Helpless as he was, he kicked, he struggled, he turned over, only to fall out of the hands which had got him in their grip, and to fall with a dull thud upon the floor.

At the same time, just as the hands were seizing him again, he managed to utter a gurgling sound, and to kick out at some one or at something, which fell with another dull noise.

Then he heard a sharp cry; it was Gwyn's voice.

There was a moment's awful stillness, and for that moment he found that the hands had released him. The next, they closed upon him again, and the cry was repeated. Again he struggled, he tried to speak; but again he was helpless, for his hands were bound to his sides; again he succeeded only in giving voice to a gurgling, stifled sound.

Then hands touched him again, tearing at the gag which was suffocating him. With a strange thrill of wild joy and relief he felt that the hands were Gwyn's; he heard a long, sobbing breath; he felt her body trembling as it leaned over him.

"Leave him alone, leave him alone!" cried she.

Again there was silence, a mysterious, awful silence. And suddenly Masson felt that the girl was being dragged away, and that she was fighting, struggling, in her turn.

Writhing, panting, striving to free himself, Masson turned himself so that the cloth which had been thrown over his head got looser and looser. In another minute he would be able at least to see.

But at the very moment that he had all but succeeded a rough hand pinned him down again. And still he heard no betraying voice. His assailants were as silent as the dead.

Then he heard a strange whisper, close to his ear, and to the ear of the man whose hands were at his throat.

It was Gwyn who was speaking; Gwyn, in a voice which sounded new and strange in Masson's ears.

"Listen, listen," said she. "He loves me — and I love him. He loves me, and he is going to marry me, marry me. You wouldn't kill the man I love!"

There was a moment of horrible suspense, and then the griping, sinewy hands released their

122 The House in the Hills

hold. Presently a door was shut, and there was another silence.

But Masson knew, as the soft, woman's touch came again upon his head, that his assailants were gone; that he was alone with Gwyn.

CHAPTER XVII.

Scarcely had the sound of the closing door and the stillness that followed convinced Masson that he was alone with Gwyn, when he felt her fingers about his neck and face. In another moment the cloth which had been thrown round his head was drawn off, and he was able to see.

He found himself still in the sickroom, at a few paces from the armchair in which he had been sleeping. But the corresponding chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, where the old woman had been accustomed to sit, was now empty.

At first he could not see Gwyn; for she had got behind his head, which she had placed upon her knees, while her fingers were busy untying the towel with which he had been gagged.

Her fingers were so strong, she worked with such hearty good will that in a very few moments his head was quite free, and he was able to speak.

All the use he made of this privilege, however, was to utter "Thank you" once or twice, in a weak, faint voice.

She bent down over him, gazing into his face with anxiety and distress, which touched his heart. Then, seeing him able to speak to her, she uttered two words, "Thank God!" and

124 The House in the Hills

without an instant's delay set herself to untie the cords with which he had been skilfully bound. Her hands, which were large and strong and deft, fulfilled their task in an incredibly short time; untying knots and liberating each limb in turn, with steady dexterity, which left no time for hysterical outburst, or even for a kindly word.

Once, however, she glanced from her work to his face, and the half-shy, half-bold look in her passionate eyes carried a secret of hers swiftly into his mind. And again, when she bent her head to unfasten one of the knots with her strong white teeth, while her long, loosened black hair flowed over his arms and breast, he felt her warm lips trembling as they touched his hand, and the knowledge the action gave him thrilled him through and through.

At last he was free, and with a low cry of satisfaction she sprang back, and stood up, offering him one hand to help him to rise.

But he found himself for the moment so much benumbed by the pressure of the cords which had so lately bound him that he had some difficulty in getting on his feet. When he succeeded the girl gave him one glance of passionate thankfulness and pride and joy. Clasp ing her hands tightly, but with a look which was still shy and modest, she whispered: "I'm so glad, so thankful! You are safe, quite safe, now!"

And then, having ascertained that he was indeed, as she said, safe for the time at least, the

remembrance that she was in her nightdress, that her feet were bare, that her hair was hanging in disorder about her shoulders, came suddenly to her mind. Casting down her eyes hastily and biting her lip, she seized one of the shawls which her grandmother had left in her chair, and, drawing it quickly round her so that it wrapped her round from neck to foot, yet still with the modest affectation of being only cold, not shy, she seated herself in the empty chair by the fire, and with an assumption of acting mechanically, and from no mere self-consciousness, she put her hands up to her head and hastily twisted her long hair into a thick coil which she tucked into the shawl at the back of her neck.

In the meantime she tried to speak in a matter-of-fact tone.

"You must think, doctor, that you are in a den of thieves, murderers!" said she. "But I am going to show you that you are mistaken!"

Masson made no reply. After the experience he had just gone through, how could he give her even a conventional assurance that he had no such thoughts as she suggested?

"You do think so, don't you?" she asked, her voice breaking a little on this second question.

Then Masson, who had been keeping his eyes away from her, in deference to the girl's feelings, ventured a look at her face. Not that he could see much of it, for there was only so much light in the room as came from the red coals of

126 The House in the Hills

a flameless fire; the night light had gone out or had been extinguished.

But even in the obscurity he could distinguish the one fact that in the girl's black eyes there burned a strange light, which transfigured her whole face and lifted her out of the dominion of common things. He stood before her, looking down at her upturned face as he supported himself with one hand on the mantelpiece, and felt as if in the presence of a queen, a saint, a heroine.

When at last he found his voice it was very subdued, very earnest.

"I know," said he, gently, "that I am in a house which is honored by the presence of a noble, heroic woman!"

At these words a long shivering sigh went through her frame and seemed to convulse her. He glanced anxiously at her and saw that her face was radiant with a strange joy, that two tears were glistening in her eyes.

He was so deeply moved that there rushed to his lips some words still more enthusiastic, still more eloquent; but even as the first stammering sound came from him she put up one hand imperiously and checked him.

"Thank you," said she simply, in a low voice. "Thank you for your kindness. But what you are good enough to think of me does not alter what you think of — of ——"

She stopped, her voice shaking, her lips trembling. Masson then spoke, in the same low

voice as before, and in the same deeply respectful manner.

"I am ready to hear whatever you may have to tell me, about any one," said he. "In the meantime you must remember that you are not strong yet, that you must — must get some rest."

She sprang to her feet.

"But you," said she, "what will you do? Where will you go? I—I—" She stopped, drew a long breath, and went on in a tone which she tried in vain to make composed and indifferent. "Of course you will be quite safe——"

But when she got as far as these words she broke down, sank again into the chair, and, burying her face in her hands, broke into a passion of hysterical sobbing. He put his hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Come," said he, in a tone which he made determined and almost stern. "Now I must speak to you as the doctor. You must go back to bed; you must try to sleep; and you may rest quite sure that I shall look after myself very carefully till morning." She was shaking her head, clinging with one hand to his sleeve. "Come," he went on in a gentler, more persuasive tone, "guardian angels, you know, must take care of themselves, if only for the sake of the persons whom they guard."

These words checked at once the flow of her grief. She looked up, still sobbing, but already putting some restraint upon herself.

"Yes, yes," said she, "I understand. And — and I will; I will rest; I will be careful. Only,

only tell me this; what will you do? Where will you go till morning?"

"I shall go downstairs into the kitchen; it is 3 o'clock; I shall not have long to wait before some one is about. And I will be as prudent and as cautious as if my life were as valuable as my best friends seem to suppose."

She listened eagerly, solemnly. When he had finished speaking he took her hand in his. She was still sitting in the armchair and trembling violently, but the firm grasp of his fingers seemed to exercise upon her a calming influence, and after a couple of seconds the clasp of her own hand was as firm and as steady as that of his.

"Good night," said she, in a low voice at last. "I won't say goodby. Take care. And—and to-morrow I will explain. Oh, yes, I can explain!"

She suddenly snatched her hand away from him, and he retreated and stumbled down stairs.

But when he reached the bottom he saw, against the dim light which came through the open doorway of the room he had left, the figure of the girl as she stood outside, watching him as far as she could, a guardian angel to the last.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Masson stumbled into the kitchen, which was quite dark, lighted a candle and sat down, not to sleep again, but to think over the fresh developments of the night.

Who were the perpetrators of the outrage upon him? That question, narrow as were the limits within which it could be answered, was as difficult to solve as ever. He had heard and seen nothing to help him to any further knowledge than this, that more than one person had been concerned in it. The probabilities were, he thought, in favor of the belief that the attack upon him had been made by the lad Tom and Coch Tal, with the connivance, if not the actual assistance, of the old woman.

That Tregaron had had a hand in it he could scarcely believe. The farmer's conduct throughout had been straightforward, while the manner of the other three persons toward himself had been uniformly suspicious and bad.

That their object had been murder he could not doubt. What plunder would he be likely to yield worth such a crime? That was the mystery. Surely some other motive must be sought; and this, he thought, could hardly be other than jealousy on the part of Coch Tal, or

fear lest Masson should find out the truth concerning his brother's fate.

Here again there was a mystery. Granville had not carried on his person either much money or much property of value; certainly but a poor booty for which to run the risks attendant upon murder.

Was there a taint of madness about any of the dwellers at the hillside farm to account for such apparently motiveless conduct? As a medical man, he knew too much about the strange manifestations which insanity takes to thrust the idea aside as untenable; but, on the other hand, he had seen no sign of mental deficiency of a pronounced sort in any member of the strange household, being inclined to ascribe the eccentricities of the witch-like old woman rather to ill-temper than to imbecility.

As for Gwyn, he could not think of her without a softening of the heart, a glow of gratitude and admiration. That this girl had sacrificed her own comfort, her own rest, during the past few nights, he was now convinced beyond a doubt. She had feared some such outrage as that of which he had been made a victim, and had conceived the idea of protecting him by keeping him within the range of her own watchful eyes. To do this she had feigned illness when she was on the high road to recovery.

It was she who had been the watcher and he who had been the watched during those nights when they had all been puzzled by the inconsistency between her favorable symptoms and

her vehement complaints of pain and weakness.

What could he do in gratitude to the girl for her splendid conduct, her unselfish care? His heart beat quickly and his eyes grew moist as he thought of it.

And then he heard a heavy tread in the room over his head and knew that the farmer and his son were getting up.

It was 5 o'clock and still dark. But before many minutes were over the door opened and the old woman came in with sticks and paper to light the fire.

She stopped short and blinked, for the first time in his recollection, when she saw the lighted candle and the doctor sitting by the table. But she made no comment as she went down on her knees to her work, and then proceeded to prepare the table for breakfast.

In the meantime Masson had heard the voices of Gwyn and of her father in earnest conversation on the stairs; and a little later he heard the farmer and Tom go out by the backway to their early work.

Presently the old woman disappeared. And he was left alone until it was nearly 7 o'clock.

Then Gwyn came in. She looked pale and fragile, and she walked rather unsteadily; but it was plain that she was much further advanced on the road to complete health than she had pretended.

The confirmation of his belief, and the remembrance of the reason of this ruse on her part,

132 The House in the Hills

brought a lump into Masson's throat; so that although he advanced toward her, and took her hand in his in greeting, he could not at first utter a single word.

They stood silent, both deeply moved, for some seconds, until Gwyn, recovering herself, and reddening slightly, said, in a whisper:

"I want to tell you now — what you said you'd hear; the reason, the reason of — of what was done to you. It was very wrong, wicked, unjustifiable, of course, but they would not have done you any real harm. It was only a trick, a trick to frighten you; because of — of jealousy!"

As she uttered the last words she turned away and spoke shyly and quickly. Whatever he thought he considered it best to accept the suggestion without open scepticism, so he merely inclined his head.

"Of course it was absurd, most absurd. But they do not understand. So I said — what I did — you heard me, did you not?" Masson bowed his head in assent. "I said it to keep them quiet — to — to get rid of them, in fact. I won't apologize, doctor, for you know why I did it. You are going to marry me; that is to be taken for granted as long as you are here. But when you go away — and I will find means of getting you away — then I will tell them the truth, and there will be an end, an end of it all, of everything."

At the beginning of her speech she had shown some energy, but the last words she uttered in a

strange, dreamy, half-prophetic tone, which touched and moved him deeply.

He came a little nearer to her and tried to look into her face. And as he did so the door into the washhouse was burst open by a gust of wind from the outer door, which was opened at that moment by the men coming in to breakfast.

Both Gwyn and the doctor started; and as the farmer and Tom and Coch Tal filed in, and, after the morning's greetings, took their places at the tables it was plain enough by the expression of the three faces that the little scene they had witnessed had conveyed a very distinct impression to their several minds.

Coch Tal looked ferocious, gloomy and savage. He kept his eyes away from the doctor, and when Gwyn wished him good morning, he answered her only by a curt word, without looking at her or offering any congratulation on her reappearance downstairs.

Tom, who looked more sheepish than ever, and who betrayed, to Masson's eyes, by his demeanor, that he had been one of the assailants of the night before, grinned, and pinched his sister's arm with an ugly, knowing leer.

Tregaron himself shook Masson's hand in a strong grip, and said in a low voice in his ear:

"I've heard. I wish you joy. My loss will be your gain, sir, gentleman though you are, and though it's not for me to say so, perhaps!"

And Gwyn bit her lip as her father kissed her, and sat down in her place with a grave face, and without so much as a glance at anybody.

134 The House in the Hills

Only the old woman, who slid into her chair by the fire when the rest had taken their seats at the table, munched her bread and sipped her tea, and dipped her crusts and nibbled them, as unconcernedly as ever.

The day went by uneventfully for Masson, who worked with the rest of the men at the snow clearing, and had little opportunity for conversing with anybody in private.

The farmer, indeed, was the only person who seemed to be quite at his ease with the doctor. He was pleased and proud of the engagement between Masson and Gwyn, and he spoke freely of the comfort it gave him to think of his little girl's being settled in life, with a "real gentleman, and one who had saved her life," to take care of her. He said how much he should miss her himself, and how sorry he was that she would go so far away.

"But, then," he added, with a shrewd shake of the head, "maybe it's as well. After all, though, you're too much of a gentleman to be ashamed of us, still we're not grand enough folks for you, sir, when all is said and done. It's only our Gwyn that's fit for you, and there's the truth."

Masson found these remarks rather hard to reply to, but he listened and made such feeble comments as he could. He noted, while he spoke, the piercing eyes of Coch Tal fixed upon him with a penetrating shrewdness which seemed to suggest that the huge, red-bearded

son of the mountains guessed more than Tregaron himself did.

Or was it that he knew more?

It was not until supper time that he had a chance of speaking again to Gwyn alone. He had been working hard out of doors all day, and she had kept out of his way when he entered the house at meal times. But he happened to enter the kitchen before the other men, and as he did so he met Gwyn coming down stairs.

"Where will you sleep to-night?" she asked abruptly, in a tone which betrayed that this question had been troubling her.

Masson hesitated. Then a thought struck him.

"In the loft with Merrick, if he'll let me," he answered at last.

But Gwyn was startled by the proposal.

"No, no," said she, "you must not; let me think!"

She put her hands up to her head, as if distracted by terrible thoughts and fears. But Masson smiled confidently into her face.

"You will never think of anything better than that," said he gently. "Give me an acknowledged enemy rather than a treacherous friend."

"What do you mean? Whom do you mean by 'a treacherous friend'?"

"I mean no one in particular," answered Masson. "But Merrick is the only person who has shown me open antagonism and, at the same time, he is the sort of man to whom I could trust myself."

136 The House in the Hills

She seemed much struck by these words and she looked into his face attentively after he had uttered them.

"Perhaps you are right," she said at last, in a hesitating voice. "You are wiser than I am, of course, sir."

He opened the door of the kitchen, where they now heard the voices of the others, and followed her in.

Coch Tal, who had begun his supper, scowled at them both.

Masson sat down beside him, and at once opened the matter to him by requesting permission to sleep in a corner of his loft. The peasant stared at him in undisguised surprise.

"With me, mister!" cried he in rough, jeering tones. "Why, sure you wouldn't find any feather beds there, nor yet no pillows soft enough for your liking!"

"I think a board and a brick would be soft enough for me to-night!" returned the young doctor good-humoredly. "And the roof overhead is all the luxury I want."

The farmer had begun to protest and to offer his own room. But Masson would not hear of it. In the midst of the dispute between them, Coch Tal's deep voice bawled out, as he glanced first at Gwyn and then at Masson:

"All right, sir. You can share my loft, if you like."

And, in spite of the farmer's angry and offended objections, the matter was settled thus.

Everybody was so thoroughly tired out by the

hard work of the day that, after sitting, stupidly, almost in silence, for a few minutes, when supper was over, they dispersed in search of rest.

Masson went straight to the loft, while Merrick went to the sheds for a last look at some sheep they had rescued that day from the open hillside, where they had been blockaded by the snow.

Before Coch Tal reached the loft in his turn Masson was fast asleep.

He was roused ten minutes later by a rough, fierce shake, and starting up he found Coch Tal bending over him, with a savage scowl upon his face. In one hand he held a wood chopper, and with the other he was still clutching the doctor's arm.

"Wake up!" cried he, roughly. "Wake up!" I've got guilt enough on my soul. I don't want to kill a sleeping man! Wake up! Get up! And help me to keep the devil down!"

And even as he spoke he raised the axe above his head, and clenched his teeth in a look of fierce, burning hatred.

In the flickering, misty light of the smoking tallow candle he looked like a demon, Masson thought as he staggered to his feet.

CHAPTER XIX.

“Devil?”

Masson stammered out the word, repeating it from Coch Tal's speech, as the huge mountaineer stepped back, and glared at him with glowing eyes.

Aroused thus suddenly, Masson, who had fallen into a sound and dreamless sleep, almost thought for the moment that it was some emissary from the sulphurous regions of hell who thundered these threatening words in his ear. The next moment, coming to himself, and remembering the facts of his position, he stretched his limbs, almost with unconcern, under the very nose of his antagonist.

“Look here,” said he at last, in a voice which was still sleepy, still weary, looking, as he spoke, straight into the angry eyes of the other man, “I'm dead beat; I'm absolutely without means of defence, if you choose to attack me. And I've had such a pretty time of it since I've been in this hole of a place that, upon my word, I don't much care whether you knock out my brains or not!”

And with these words he sat down on a wooden packing case which served both as a seat and a table and dropped his head listlessly into his hands.

He heard Coch Tal's labored breathing, heard him throw down the axe with a force which made the flooring rattle, heard him pace up and down the bare floor with slow and heavy steps. And he heard also the snorting of the cattle in the shed below, and the stamping of the hoofs of one restless beast, startled by the noise above.

But all these sounds seemed to come to him from a long way off, and to rouse in Masson no interest, no thought. He was, as he said, so tired, so much accustomed to sensational alarms, that now the noise made by the angry man moved him no more than that made by the disturbed cattle; and, yawning as he sat, he almost dozed before the sonorous tones of the peasant uttered words which suddenly woke him into full consciousness.

"Sir," said Coch Tal, in a deep, vibrating voice, as he stopped short in front of the doctor and put one hand upon him with a strong grip, "your brains are safe enough. I'd have liked to fight you, fair and square, man to man; I'd have liked it dearly." And as he spoke his eyes blazed again and he clenched his teeth, as a wave of hatred seemed to pass over him. He suddenly released Masson's shoulder and stepped back, as if afraid that his self-control would give way. "But if you take it like that, and if you don't care what becomes of you, why, I can do nothing."

And in his turn he sat down, choosing the end of his bedstead for a seat and nursing his crossed leg gloomily.

Masson looked at him attentively.

"Why should you want to fight me?" asked he. "Come, tell me the truth. I'm at your mercy up here, you know. Tell me the truth and have done with it, and then throw me over into one of the ravines or crevasses you have up here, which you find so convenient for the accidental disappearance of rash travellers who for some reason or other are better out of the way!"

Masson knew these words were an insult of the grossest kind, but he did not care. The dangers which surrounded him on every side made him reckless. If they chose to serve him as they had undoubtedly served his brother he could not help it, and at least he would have the satisfaction of braving them to their face.

So he did not even look up as he spoke to note the effect of his words. He did raise his head, however, when Coch Tal answered, not in the tones of fierce defiance he had expected to hear, but in an awestruck, reproachful voice.

"Sir, you never hear anything but the truth from me, believe me. Not all the truth, sometimes; I dursn't always tell you all. But I never tell you no lies, and that's a true word."

"Well," said Masson, in a less antagonistic tone, "will you tell me, then, why you want to fight me?"

"Yes, sir, I may tell you that."

But he paused again.

"Is it on account of my poor brother? And what I have said to you about him?"

"No, sir, it ain't nothing to do with him,"

answered Coch Tal, in a sorrowful tone. "It's because of Gwyn."

"Ah!"

The doctor raised his head; the desire for sleep had by this time been chased away, and he listened as earnestly as Coch Tal could wish.

"And what have I done that you should want to fight me on her account?"

The veins in the peasant's face began to swell, and he clenched his fists convulsively.

"What have you done? What haven't you done, sir, in the way of bringing misery and ruin and trouble to her? What have you done! Ha, ha, ha!"

He uttered a short, hard laugh, and then was suddenly silent. Masson stared at him with astonishment and apprehension.

"Why, man," said he at last, "what mad notion have you got in your head? Because you love this girl yourself, why must you imagine that no other man can come near her without loving her? Your love and jealousy make you mad, and blind, and deaf to reason. She and I have been merely doctor and patient, and nothing more."

"You fool! Clever as you may be, and gentleman and doctor, too, you are no better than a fool where a woman comes in!" cried Coch Tal savagely, staring at him, with his head protruding and his eyes on fire. "Merely doctor and patient! Ha, ha, ha! Poor lass, poor lass!"

Masson looked at him in ever-increasing

142 The House in the Hills

amazement. How far had Coch Tal's insane doubts and fears carried him?

"Don't you know," said he at last, ignoring the peasant's abuse and trying to bring him to facts, "what Gwyn told her father? You heard, I am sure!"

"Heard! Yes, I heard!" retorted Merrick sullenly and contemptuously. "I heard her say you and her were engaged to marry. But I knew that it was only a blind; she only said it to get you away with a whole skin. Oh, I knew that."

"Then what are you troubling your head about? If you are satisfied that I have never made love to her, and that what she said was said only to help me to get safely away, what in the world have you to grumble about!"

"That is what I've got to grumble about," retorted Coch Tal emphatically. "That it is all a make-up, a make-believe; that you care no more for her than if she was the grass under your feet, and that you'll go away with a light heart and a free conscience, and leave my poor girl to eat her heart out here in the hills, with never so much as a thought for her!"

Again Masson stared.

"How often am I to tell you," said he, "that there has never been a question of love between us? I honor and respect and admire her as a good, true, splendid woman. But that is not at all like the feeling you have for her ——"

Coch Tal interrupted him, throwing back his

head and showing a face down which the tears were chasing each other.

"No, mister," said he in a trembling voice, "it's not the feeling I have for her. And no more it is the feeling she has for you."

Masson was struck dumb. The man spoke with the earnestness of strong conviction, and in a voice eloquent of many and deep emotions. After a short pause he went on:

"Sir, it's you that's been blind, not me. Love like what I have for Gwyn don't make a man blind; it makes him see better and clearer than he did afore. I knew when you came it meant danger for her — and for me! I felt it, sir, down in my very bones. It's superstition, they say, don't they, to know things are going to happen afore they come? Well, superstition it may be, but it helps as much as another thing. And I knew it as plain that night you came as if I'd read it in the great book. I knew you'd come to steal my girl's heart away, and that you'd care no more for what you'd got than I do for the cattle I tend and feed."

Upon these words he broke down, and his voice became husky with suppressed sobs. An awful touching sight it was, this breakdown of the strong, fierce mountaineer, this melting of defiance and dogged animosity under the fire of the passion which consumed him. Masson was touched to the quick.

"Merrick," said he, gravely, "I never guessed this; I hope now it is not true."

"It's no use hoping," retorted Coch Tal with

144 The House in the Hills

energy, "because I'm not guessing; I'm telling you what's true, what I know. And I don't even say you're to blame; I don't suppose you are! You're a gentleman, and you're handsome, and soft-spoken, and your hands are white and soft, almost like a woman's, and whiter than our women's by a long way. And she knew you were in danger here ——"

"Why should she know that?" asked Masson eagerly.

But the peasant grew more reserved at once.

"Well, you've said so yourself," said he roughly, "and I suppose you know. Anyhow, she thought you weren't safe, I suppose, and that makes a man interesting in a girl's eyes. And so, I suppose, she looked at you, and thought about you, and compared you with us, the rough folks she's used to, and saw a difference, and — and that did it. And now there's nought to be done but to speed you on your way, and for her to face her trouble — alone!"

"Come," said Masson, "that's not the way I should take it if I were a man like you, fond of a girl who I thought had a passing fancy for some one else."

But Merrick shook his head.

"Passing fancies are for those that see fresh faces every day," said he. "We in the hills don't have such things. We keep the memory of the one, and we hug it in our breast, and live upon it, and feed upon it, and make it a thorn to tear us with, if it can't be a joy to strengthen and comfort us."

"I mean," said Masson, "that a fancy for a stranger who has only passed a few days in the neighborhood cannot weigh very heavily against the love and the patience of an old and well-tried lover. On the contrary, it shows him up to the best advantage, in contrast with the man who rides away."

Coch Tal shook his head despondently.

"If she'd liked me before she might come back to me," said he hoarsely, "but she never has. I've always known that. And as I know the girl's heart, just as I know my own, for all I'm only a rough, ignorant man, I know, too, that she won't get over this any more than I could get over the loss of her, if I had to go away from seeing her. And I know that I shall have to stay on after all I've gone through and see her break her heart and never be able to so much as to take her head on my shoulder and tell her I'm sorry!

Masson was listening very attentively with his hands loosely clasped and his head bent.

"If I thought," said he gravely, "that there was any truth in what you — fancy, Merrick, I — I would save her from any such fate as you fear."

"What! You'd marry her?"

Coch Tal was alert, alive, in a moment.

"Yes," said the doctor after a slight pause. "If that were the only way to save the girl from misery I would do so!"

The peasant came forward, and drawing a

146 The House in the Hills

packing case along with him as a seat, sat close to the doctor, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Doctor," said he in a deep whisper that seemed to bring the words up from his heart, "it is the only way. You've not got the means to judge what I have, you don't know all I know, you can never know it. But you may take my word for it, if you marry the girl and take her away from here, from the whole lot of us, and if you'll be kind to her and treat her as you ought, you'll be doing the only thing that can make her happy and repaying her goodness to you like the gentleman you are!"

But Masson felt less certain of this.

"Are you so sure," said he, "that marriage with a man who has nothing warmer than admiration and gratitude to give her is the highroad to happiness for a woman?"

Coch Tal's features expanded in a strange, dreamy smile.

"I am sure," said he. "You see, sir, I know Gwyn, and I know her feelings, because they are the same as my own. If she could trust herself to me with or without love, just out of gratitude like, I shouldn't ask no more. And I'd be as happy as a bird on the tree. And I'd make her happy, too, that I well know!"

"And you don't think it foolish of you to throw away your only chance of her coming round to you?"

Coch Tal's rugged features glowed with a look which was almost sublime, as he answered:

"No, sir. For if I know her to be happy,

why, it'll be a kind of happiness for myself, too. That's how you feel, sir, when you care for a girl as I care for Gwyn Tregaron."

Masson bowed his head. There was a noble simplicity in the man which made praise of his conduct, of his feelings, an impertinence.

In silence he lay down to rest and listened to the deep sigh which Coch Tal uttered from time to time from his resting place in the corner.

Tired as they both were the sleep of both men was fitful and broken throughout the night.

CHAPTER XX.

When Masson awoke next morning, he found himself alone in the loft, Coch Tal having long since descended to his day's work.

The sunlight was already strong, and Masson saw, with a mixed feeling of relief and dread, that there were signs of thaw on the sparkling surface of the snow. From the windows of the loft he could see across the narrow valley to the hills on the other side of the lake-born stream below, and it was evident that the patches of bare rock were more extended, and that whole slabs of snow had slipped from the heights and lodged in the first cranny they reached.

If the thaw continued, the way back to Trecoed, and thence to civilization, would soon be open. But the thought of the changed course of life which this might inaugurate was not one of unmixed joy to the doctor.

For with his admiration and liking for Gwyn Tregaron there mingled no feeling strong enough to be called love. It was gratitude alone which prompted him to the resolution he had come to of asking her to be his wife. She had undoubtedly saved his life, and, although he felt misgivings as to the strength of this passion which, according to Coch Tal, he had inspired in the girl's breast, there could be

no doubt whatever that, with the knowledge she had of her present surroundings, she would be happier if taken into another and less equivocal sphere.

So, having made up his mind, he sought and found an opportunity of speaking to the girl. When they met at breakfast he saw, now that Coch Tal had opened his eyes, certain signs in Gwyn which went far to confirm what the peasant had said. There was a restlessness, a nervousness in the girl's manner, a shy, timid look in her eyes when they met his, which made it impossible to doubt that there was more than mere friendliness toward him in her heart.

So when breakfast was over, and he had left the house with the other men to start the day's work, which was now that of cutting a path down the hillside into the valley below, he made the excuse of taking off his overcoat to return to the farmhouse, through one of the windows of which he saw Gwyn moving about at her household work.

He came upon her suddenly, and she started and blushed.

"You mustn't work too hard, just at first," said he, kindly. "Remember, you have not got your strength back yet, and you don't want to be ill again."

"No," said she, "I — I don't want to be ill again."

She looked as if she wanted to say something more, but finally she turned away in silence. He followed her across the room.

"Gwyn," said he very gently, "will you be sorry when your doctor goes? Will you miss your sweetheart?"

If he had been in any doubt of the state of her feelings toward him, he was at once put in possession of the whole truth. This question, put to her suddenly, brought up to the surface, out of the depths of her heart, the hidden reserves of passionate affection which she had believed safe in their hiding place. She flashed upon him one look of startled emotion, and then, turning abruptly away, hung her head without reply.

He was deeply touched, and fully confirmed in his intention of offering her such happiness as it was in his power to give.

"Gwyn," said he, "will you be my wife?"

The girl looked up at once, trembling from head to foot.

"What!" she whispered, breathlessly. And there shone for a moment in her black eyes a radiant look of happiness such as no man could have witnessed unmoved. "What! Do you mean it? You!"

"Indeed I do, Gwyn. I mean it most steadfastly; and I will do everything in my power to make you happy!"

Still she stood as if under some spell, quite still and breathing quickly. A sort of glory seemed to frame her face and make it at that moment more exquisitely beautiful than that of any woman he had ever seen. After a pause of some seconds Masson put out his right hand and

gently raised hers to his lips. Kind, tender as the action was, perhaps the quick intelligence of the love-stricken girl detected in the touch something which told her of the difference between his feelings toward her and hers toward him. However that may be, after the lapse of another moment she gave a long sigh and then drew away her hand sharply, with a laugh which grated a little on his ear. It was not a hard or a harsh laugh, but it was the merriment of the peasant girl, not of the woman of surface refinement.

"Doctor," said she sharply, "you are very good, very good, and I thank you. But no. We won't spoil it. You are my sweetheart," and again her voice quivered on the word, "while you stay here. But when you go, and that will be soon now, very soon, you and I will be both as free as air."

"But if I don't want to be free, Gwyn?" persisted Masson, with all lover-like ardor.

The girl flashed upon him a proud, searching look.

"But you do!" cried she, quickly.

There was a moment's silence. Then it was she who spoke again:

"I'm not ungrateful, doctor. I don't deny that if I was in your rank of life that — that I'd give you a different answer."

"But surely that is my business," interrupted Masson, quickly. "If I, understanding all the circumstances just as well as you do —"

"But I doubt if you do," said she quickly. "I

152 The House in the Hills

doubt if a man, even a clever man like you, can understand and see it all as well as even a simple sort of a woman. Anyhow, I've made up my mind; and I beg you not to say any more about it, because I don't deny it's a temptation for me." She tried to laugh a little. "But as it's a temptation I don't mean to yield to, and as I know what's best for me as well as you, why, talking would only make it worse for me to bear."

"But, Gwyn, I don't understand you quite." She shook her head gently and smiled. He went on: "You are not happy here, I know!"

She raised her hand quickly to stop him, evidently fearing what he might be going to say.

"I am not very happy," said she. "I don't deny that. But my going away wouldn't make me any happier. I should always be worrying about those I had left ——"

"And you don't think you would be happy enough, as my wife, to forget your worries?"

After a short pause she answered in a low voice:

"No. Because I feel the differences between you and me and between my friends and my ways and yours more than you can do just now. You don't see me with open eyes just yet, sir, because of all the circumstances of your seeing me first. You can't see that I'm only just a farmer's daughter, with the ways of my own class, which are not the ways of yours. I don't know whether I could ever do right in a new life, and I know you'd have to go through a deal

on my account at first. Oh, I know it; I know it! And so, if you please, sir, we'll say no more about it, but stick to our bargain. And you're my sweetheart," she flushed as she uttered the word, "while you're here, but you're free and I'm free, as soon as you reach the bottom of the hill."

And with these words, with a pretty glow in her proud face, she left him abruptly, going out through the washhouse before he could stop her.

Masson remained for a few minutes in deep thought, admiring the girl for her feelings, her manner, for her strange good sense, and not quite sure whether he felt most relief or disappointment at her decision.

Then he was free! And she was free! He stretched his arms and prepared to go out to his work, when he was startled by a slight noise in the outhouse, which betrayed that there had been a listener to their conversation.

He was on the alert in a moment, for he knew that there was a new danger to himself in the possibility of their compact becoming known.

Who was the eavesdropper?

CHAPTER XXI.

Masson crossed the kitchen floor very softly and opened the outhouse door. But there was no one there. The place was so large, so dark; there were so many hiding places among the lumber, so many pitfalls besides the old well, that he dared not make a very exhaustive survey. He went back again into the kitchen, however, with the definite impression that some one had been in there listening to his conversation with Gwyn, and that the eavesdropper, whoever it was, had found a way of egress.

The belief was a disturbing one. Masson knew that in the belief of the household that he was engaged to Gwyn, that he was going to marry her and take her away with him, lay his safety. And he was therefore not surprised when the girl made a pretext for detaining him after dinner to whisper in his ear that he must try to get away without delay.

He was startled by her earnestness.

"Some one overheard us this morning?" said he, abruptly.

She bowed her head in silence. And he said nothing more for a few seconds. The feeling he had for her made this sudden prospect of parting with her forever a distressing and disturbing one.

“And so I am to go?”

“Yes. And you must go at once. There must be no more delay. I don't say the journey will be without danger, but it is worth the risk — any risk. There will be light for nearly three hours, and by that time you will have got out of the hills, if you have any luck. The road to the bottom of the hill is clear now, isn't it?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you must start, then, and get away as quickly as you can. The others are on the hill yonder, making a way up to the rest of the sheep. Go, now, at once, before they miss you.”

As she spoke she thrust out her hand, and he took it in his. Before he could utter a word in his turn, however, the door was opened briskly, and the farmer's cheerful voice cried:

“Hi, doctor, we've been looking for you. Come and lend us a hand. We must push on up hill before dusk comes.”

“I'd been asking the doctor to go down the hill, father, into the valley, to see whether there's a way up to Thomas's yet,” said she. “We're running rather short of provisions, and I know Mrs. Thomas can help us. Make haste, doctor, and don't be long,” she went on, turning to him with a warning frown which her father did not see. “Get down the hill, and look along the valley to the left. If you see men at work a little distance off, cutting their way toward you, shout to them and tell them I would be glad to know whether they can let me have a side of bacon.”

She hurried the doctor out, helping him on

156 The House in the Hills

with his overcoat and muffler, and giving him when she could a warning glance to urge him quickly on his way. Then she opened the front door, which had now been freed from snow, and let him out, with a smile and a nod. Her father was standing behind her, just inside the doorway. Masson found it hard to look back at her with the indifference which it was necessary to assume, as if starting on an errand which would take him ten minutes.

Farmer Tregaron's eyes were fixed upon him all the time with a look which Masson thought suspicious, curious. Under this fire nothing in the nature of a tender parting from Gwyn was possible. He would have offered his hand for one last clasp, but her own arms were held rigidly behind her back; and although there was a strange look of yearning and sadness in her black eyes, her lips uttered no word.

"Goodby, then," muttered Masson in a muffled voice.

"Goodby, doctor, for the present," returned she, loudly.

And as if fearful lest he should by some word or action or look betray the understanding there was between them, she shut the door.

Masson sped on his way down the hill with a tumult of strange feelings raging in his heart. He could not believe that he had seen Gwyn's face for the last time; that the deliverance from prison, for which he had been longing, had come at last, and brought nothing but soreness and regret with it.

As he crossed the stone-encumbered plain in front of the farmhouse, and began the descent of the hill by the narrow cutting through the deep snowdrifts which he had helped to make, he was torn with regrets and longings, with remorse and distress, in which his admiration and reverence for Gwyn struggled with his self-reproach on his brother's account.

Had he not wasted his time up there, and the opportunity which he should never have again, of finding out what had become of poor Granville? Should he not have made still greater efforts than he had done to discover the truth of his brother's disappearance?

And again, ought he not to have insisted more strongly than he had done upon his wish to make Gwyn his wife? What would become of the girl, the noble girl who had so unselfishly watched over him, and sacrificed her own desires of happiness to her belief that she was acting for the best for him in refusing his offer? He knew that she was miserable in her life, that there were terrible secrets of the strange household to which she belonged which must lie with tenfold weight upon her own innocent soul.

These considerations caused his heart to bleed and his steps to lag, until, by the time he reached the bottom of the hill and had to face the plunge into the snow of the valley, he had almost made up his mind to turn back again and to approach her with a more resolute front and with a more impassioned prayer that she would become his wife.

The only consideration which formed a check upon this inclination was the vague belief he had that her own brother and grandmother had been in some way connected with his brother's death. But then, again, appearances seemed to be so much stronger against Coch Tal, the guide, than against the old woman and her grandson that this suspicion could scarcely be considered strong enough to influence his action. And this was especially the case, in view of the fact that Gwyn herself had made no suggestion, either by word or manner, of there being such an obstacle as this between them.

So, when he reached the bottom of the hill, Masson turned to retrace his footsteps, after having glanced down the valley and up again, and seen no sign of another human being. The way to Trecoed did indeed seem to be open to him, for he could see the path on the opposite hill, which the sliding masses of snow had left free. Even with this prospect of escape in sight, the thought of Gwyn made him turn back.

And as he did so his heart gave an odd leap within him, for, standing a few feet from him, and evidently on his track, was David Tregaron, the farmer.

The men looked at each other for a moment in silence. Tregaron had been taken by surprise, for there was on his face a scowl which it had not worn on their last meeting, and which he instantly tried to exchange for a smile. Masson, on his side, was considerably disturbed to find

that he had been followed. The former spoke first.

"I thought," he began, "that you mightn't be able to find your way up again so easy as you had thought to, sir. It's still slippery up here and not altogether safe."

Masson heard, or fancied he heard, in these words something more than a warning — a kind of threat.

"Thank you," said he coldly. "I can find my way about better than you think."

Even if he had wished to go forward on his way to Trecoed he saw that to carry out such a plan, in the face of what would be determined opposition, was impossible. Tregaron was armed with a huge axe for one thing; and in his position above the other to aim a fatal blow at the doctor below would have been easy enough. And, in the second place, if Masson had attempted to escape and to trust to his heels, he would have had no chance against the man who knew every chink and cranny of the hills and of the valley between.

He at once, therefore, began to reascend the hill, while the farmer waited for him, and then dropped a few steps behind.

"We are getting on nicely, sir," went on Tregaron in as buoyant a tone as usual, "with the snow clearing. If you'll come up with me I can show you just what we've got to do. The last of the sheep will be reached by to-morrow, if things go on as well as this."

He took Masson across the little table-land in

160 The House in the Hills

a different direction from that by which he had come. Instead of going near the farmhouse, they went round by the south side of the old church walls and up the smooth slope where Masson had already been with Coch Tal.

Masson, who for the first time had begun to feel some mistrust of the farmer's motives toward him, took care to keep by his side, and not to allow Tregaron to drop behind him. He remembered the cleft in the hillside toward which they were bending their steps, and he resolved to be on his guard against accidents at that perilous point. As, by good fortune, he knew exactly when to look out for it, he managed to drop behind in his turn as the farmer and he reached the opening; and just as he took the backward step he was shocked to see on Tregaron's face a look which betrayed a hostile feeling in every line of the eagle face.

At that moment Masson felt a sick horror at his position. How was he, unused to the mountain life, to the steep paths and unexpected precipices and chasms, to hope to escape from the hardy hill-born farmer, whom he now knew to be his enemy?

Should he stop to reason with the man? How could he open the subject? David Tregaron was to-day as stolid and taciturn as he had before shown himself to be talkative and lively. He hung back, he looked away when Masson turned his eyes toward him; he betrayed in every feature, in every sidelong look, such an implacable dislike, such a threatening lowering

animosity, that the doctor did not know by what means to attack him on the subject of Gwyn, or of his own departure.

"A nasty place this?" said Masson at last, with a glance down toward the chasm they had reached.

The farmer, who was a step in advance, laughed shortly.

"You've been here before then?"

"Yes."

Tregaron wheeled round briskly.

"And have you been up the rock to Pen Uchaf?" asked he abruptly, "that looks straight down into Llyn Foel?"

"No. This is as far as I've been."

"Come along, then. I'll show you a sight you won't forget."

If Masson could have declined the invitation he would have done so. But the tone in which it was given made it rather a command than a request; so he went on, keeping close to the farmer's side or a step or two behind, and evading all attempts, real or fancied, on the farmer's part to make him go first.

They branched off sharply to the right, walking alongside the chasm until they reached a point where it could be crossed without difficulty in the stride. After this the ascent became much steeper, although, owing to the nature of the ground and its comparatively sheltered position, they found it less encumbered by snow than the other parts of the mountain.

As they got higher the way became more diffi-

cult. Here the patches of bare rocks were frequent, and these dark gray slabs were slippery and steep, so that the short winter afternoon had begun to darken toward evening by the time they reached the top.

There a grand and awful sight broke suddenly upon the view.

The point of hill on which Masson and the farmer stood seemed to hang right over the black waters of the mountain pool; and Masson turned giddy and stepped back hastily when he looked down and saw the still, dark, waveless lake beneath him. A horrible notion seized him at that moment that it was from this point that his brother had been thrown, and that the silent tarn was Granville's grave.

He shuddered, and looking up at the farmer saw that the man's thin, bloodless lips were stretched into a savage grin of malice.

"It is horrible. Let us go back!" said Masson.

"Not yet," said the farmer, shortly.

And he was advancing upon the doctor with a menacing look, when a cry, in a woman's voice, reached their ears:

"Father! Father!"

CHAPTER XXII.

“Gwyn! It’s Gwyn’s voice!”

As the farmer uttered these words, a change came over his face. The savage expression disappeared, and his features became in an instant convulsed with tender anxiety.

Before he had fairly ended these few words, he had turned, and was retracing his steps down the hill at a break-neck pace, with Masson at his heels.

The cry was repeated, and Tregaron and Masson both answered by shouts, to which she answered by a sort of loud sob of relief. In a few minutes they came upon the girl, who had begun to ascend the side of Pen Uchaf in their track, but who had sunk down, exhausted and giddy, at the foot of a great slab of bare gray rock.

“Gwyn! My girl! My little girl! Out here! Oh, doctor, she’ll catch her death!”

And the angry and malignant man became in an instant the humble suppliant, and he looked pathetically up into Masson’s face, with his eyes streaming with tears.

“Help me to carry her back,” said the doctor briefly.

But Gwyn struggled to her feet. She wore no hat, only a shawl about her head and shoulders;

164 The House in the Hills

and both men were full of alarm for the consequences of her rash act. Masson, especially, was touched to the quick, for he well knew that this expedition of the girl's had been undertaken on his account.

They half led, half carried her back to the farmhouse, which was soon reached. The grandmother, who stood watching their approach from the doorway, was enjoined to change the girl's clothes at once and to put her to bed. But, after the lapse of a few minutes, Gwyn, regardless of their injunctions, came downstairs again, clinging to the banisters for support, but full of energy, of solicitude for Masson.

The farmer had disappeared without another word.

"Go back, go upstairs to bed," said the doctor, gently, as he ran forward to her assistance.

But Gwyn shook her head obstinately.

"I will go upstairs," whispered she hoarsely, "when you are safely away. Not before!"

"No, no, I shall not go! I cannot go until I see you safely through this. You will be ill again after this imprudence!"

"I shall not. You don't understand us mountain folks. We may be conquered once, but not twice. Listen. I know my father followed you. I knew you would have to come back. But this time you must not be baffled."

Masson tried to protest, but she imperiously silenced him.

"Now he thinks he has you safe, because it is

too late to try again to reach Trecoed to-night. So it is; but you must get out of this house. You must go down the hill and turn to the left and up the valley, keeping on this side of the stream until you get to Thomas's. Go up there and ask them to give you shelter for the night; and start for Trecoed as soon as it is light. Mind, don't be stopped. If some one meets you and tells you I am ill, dying, don't believe it, and don't stop. It will be a trick to turn you out of your way. God forgive me for having to warn you against my own flesh and blood. But I must save you; I must, I will!"

She looked up into his eyes with a luminous light in her own which intoxicated him.

"Gwyn," he whispered, "don't send me away from you. Let me stay until I can marry you and take you away. Let me, my darling, let me save you!"

But she drew herself energetically away.

"That has all been decided — settled," said she, peremptorily. "Now, there is only one more thing to be said. You must swear that when you leave here you will forget everything that has passed, everything that has happened. And that you will never come here again yourself, or set any one else to come here with — with inquiries, with investigations."

Masson drew back a step. She followed him up, a threatening light suddenly blazing in her eyes.

"Swear!" she repeated. "Swear!"

166 The House in the Hills

“But ——” stammered Masson. “My brother!”

“What good can you do him now?”

A groan broke from Masson’s lips.

“You know he is dead, that he must be dead. You knew that when you came here. You know that he lost his way among the mountains.”

“I do not know that!” interrupted he.

Gwyn stamped her foot.

“You know that he must have died, as many other rash travellers have died, through his own carelessness, his refusal to take a warning. What doubt can you have about that? And what good can you do by supposing anything else?” Suddenly she changed her tone, and from stern and eager, became tearful and entreating: “Oh,” she cried, as she clasped her hands, and looked at him with weeping eyes. “How can you hesitate? How can you be stubborn and mad? Must we have another crime laid at our door? Must you be sacrificed, too?”

“Who will hurt me?” said he in a low voice.

Her answer, full of fire and dignity, took him by surprise:

“I will!” cried she. “I will give you up to any fate that may overtake a lonely man among the mountains, unless you swear that you will never interfere with us, never cause us to be interfered with, on your word of honor!”

Masson could be obstinate also.

“I will not swear,” said he. “And I will take my chance.”

Without another word she left him, opened the door, and then, returning quickly, seized him by the coat sleeve, and thrust him out into the gathering darkness.

"Then," said she, "take your chance! I have told you what to do!"

He would have temporized, have pleaded, reasoned with her. But she gave him no opportunity. Even as he turned, with words of kindness, of gratitude upon his lips, she pushed the door back upon him so violently as to thrust him stumbling into the snow outside, and shut it in his face.

"Gwyn! Let me speak to you!" cried he eagerly. "Let me speak!"

But the only answer he got was the grating of the bolts of the door.

The dusk was deepening in the valley and creeping up the sides of the mountains as he staggered away, heartsore, weary of limb, and alone.

CHAPTER XXIII.

The oppression of the silence and of the gathering darkness was awful; and Reginald Masson felt that he wanted to cry aloud, to do anything to break the mournful spell of dead, solemn stillness which hung over mountains and valley alike.

He knew that it was useless to go back to the farmhouse, from the door of which he had just been ejected so unceremoniously. And, honoring and trusting Gwyn Tregaron as he did, he could not but feel that this action on her part, strange though it was, had been calculated, that she felt it to be the best course to pursue to ensure his safety.

On the other hand, it was true that her attitude, when he refused to promise not to investigate further into his brother's fate, had been one of defiance, that she had turned him out into the dangers of night upon the mountains without a word of kindness or of farewell.

But even this action on her part failed to convince him that she was as hard as her words. As he made his way with difficulty down the hillside in the darkness he decided that he would follow the advice she had given him at the beginning of their conversation and find the other farmhouse of which she had spoken.

If he could get shelter for the night he would start on his way back to Trecoed early on the following morning.

He turned to the left, therefore, when he reached the bottom of the hill and saw a light on the high ground above him on the left.

Here, however, the snow had not been cleared at all, and it was with the greatest difficulty that he reached the foot of the hill on the side of which the second farmhouse was.

After a long and toilsome struggle, in the course of which he was plunged knee-deep into drifts at every other step, he got to the foot of the hill, and from this spot found the ascent easy enough, as a path down the slope had been cut by the inhabitants of the farmhouse.

The dwelling itself, a smaller and more unpretentious place than Monachlog, with none of the claims to admiration or interest possessed by David Tregaron's home, was much easier of access. It was a small stone building, with a slate roof, and the door was mean and narrow and painted dark green.

He knocked, and a little active woman, with sharp black eyes opened it and looked at him in surprise.

"Can you give me shelter for the night?" asked Masson, conscious of difficulties in his story. "I lost my way on the first day of the snow and have been staying at Monachlog farm ever since. Starting to-night on my way back to Trecoed, I have lost my way again, and so

170 The House in the Hills

have no choice but to beg a lodging for the night."

Before he had finished his speech the good woman had opened the door wide to him and was nodding a cheerful assent.

"Dear, dear!" cried she in the sharp Welsh accent with which he was now growing so familiar. "It's a bad business to lose one's way among the hills at this time of year! And you may be thankful, sir, as you ever found your way to shelter alive at all! And to be sure you're welcome to such poor fare as we've got, and to such a bed as we can give you! I don't say it'll be what you're used to, but it'll be better than a snow drift, anyway! And we can give you a hearty welcome!"

Masson, while he thanked her, was struck by the difference between the woman's ready, cordial hospitality, and the sullen reluctance to give him a shelter for the night which David Tregaron had shown on his arrival at Monachlog. He was not displeased to find Mrs. Thomas such a chatterbox, as he was anxious to hear the local opinion concerning the strange household at the old monastery.

The kitchen was smaller than that at Monachlog, but was much more comfortably furnished. The seats and settles were all cushioned, and a large strip of warm-looking carpet covered the greater part of the floor. Mrs. Thomas apologized for not taking him into the "parlor," which, she said, was cold, as it was only used on Sundays. But she brought forth from that

state apartment a magnificent pair of three-branched candlesticks, of old Sheffield plate, and put them upon the kitchen table in honor of the guest.

The family was assembling for supper, and each member, on entering, greeted the newcomer, the men with a touch of the forelock, the women with a courtesy. There was the farmer himself, the husband of the woman who had made Masson welcome, and there were three short, broad, sturdy sons and two shorter and equally sturdy daughters.

To Masson's delight, the conversation turned, as soon as they were all seated at the table, on the family at Monachlog.

"And how's the lass?" asked Mr. Thomas, as he helped his family from a huge dish of ham and eggs. "I did hear as Tregaron was troubled about her; she'd caught cold out in the rain one day looking after the sheep for her father."

"She's been very ill," answered Masson. "I was lucky in being able to be of some little service to them; for I'm a doctor, and Mr. Tregaron had been unable to get one to come and see his daughter."

Everybody looked interested.

"And I hope they treated you well, sir, up there?" said Thomas in an inquiring tone.

"I had nothing to complain of," answered Masson. "But why do you ask? I thought you had all a great name for hospitality up here among the hills?"

172 The House in the Hills

“Well, sir, I hope we have. But, you know, sir, different folks has different ways.”

“He means, sir,” broke in his more talkative and less cautious wife, “that the Tregarons are not like other folks; leastways they haven’t been since Mrs. Tregaron died, five years back and more. And my good man thought you’d maybe noticed it yourself, sir.”

“And how do you account for that?” asked Masson.

“Well, sir, David Tregaron was always an odd sort of a man, but his wife was a good one, and helped things along. And since she went he’s took life in a loose sort of a way, so we’ve wondered, time and again, how they’ve managed to get along at all. You want to put your best foot foremost to scrape a living up here, you know, sir, and we’ve often wondered how they make shift to get butter for their bread, letting things go as Tregaron does.”

“It’s his man Merrick, that they call Coch Tal, that keeps him from going to pieces altogether,” said Thomas. “He’s a capable sort, he is; and he wouldn’t be wasting his time there if it wasn’t for the lass!”

Mrs. Thomas here looked at her husband and sighed, and the lads and lasses glanced at each other and grinned.

“It’s a deal of a pity she don’t take a liking to him!” said Mrs. Thomas.

Then there was a silence.

“The old woman is a strange creature!” said

Masson. "I never heard her open her lips the whole time I was there."

There was a look of surprise on the face of every one at the table at these words.

"She used to be talkative enough!" said Mrs. Thomas. "The difficulty was to get her to stop!"

Thomas shook his head.

"It's just one more sign of something wrong up there, if old Mrs. Tregaron's lost the gift of the gab," said he.

Nobody spoke for a few seconds. Then the farmer turned the conversation.

"And might one ask, sir, what brought you to these wild parts just as the bad weather was coming on?" said he.

"I came to try to find some trace of my brother," replied Masson, "who was lost among these hills in the beginning of October."

"Dear, dear! And have you been successful, sir?"

"Yes. And no. I have found that this Merrick, or Coch Tal, accompanied him into this valley, and that he went up to Monachlog to see the ruins. They tell me he went on by himself; but I can find no further trace."

The farmer and his wife exchanged a stealthy look. And with one accord they started fresh subjects of conversation, and refused to make any suggestion, or any hint, which could either throw Masson off or on the scent he was pursuing.

When the younger members of the family had

174 The House in the Hills

gone to bed, Masson tried again to get from the farmer or his wife some opinion, some suggestion on the matter of his brother's fate. But nothing he could say, no persuasion or entreaty, or even affected doubt, could draw them from their determined reticence.

He slept soundly in a bed in the room with the farmer's sons, and in the early morning, when the lads got up, he started on his way to Trecoed, accompanied down the slope by the eldest lad.

Just at the foot they found Coch Tal, wearing a gloomy expression of face, and speaking in a short, hard manner.

"Sir," said he to Masson, "I've come to tell you there's more snow coming down. And you'd better stay up here and not try to get back to Trecoed for a day or two."

"Snow coming!" cried Masson, in surprise. "I shouldn't have thought it by the look of the sky!"

Morning was only just breaking, but the sky was cloudless, and the air fresh and keen and touched with frost.

Coch Tal remained stolid.

"Miss Tregaron told me to come and tell you so," said he with a gathering frown.

And without another word he turned and began to plough his way back to Monachlog through the snow.

"What would you have thought?" asked Masson, turning to the young man beside him,

“that there was more snow coming down, or not?”

Young Thomas, without looking at his questioner, stared at the retreating figure of Coch Tal.

“If I’d been advised to stay, sir, by yon,” and he nodded in the direction of the red-headed peasant, “I’d stay.”

But Masson was obstinate. He was weary of the mysteries and dangers, of the fears, the doubts and suspicions which had pressed upon him during the whole time of his sojourn among the hills. These few days seemed now to have been weeks, months; since he could do no good to Gwyn, the one person whom he knew to be worthy of all sympathy, of all respect, the only member of the Monachlog household who was beyond suspicion, he felt that he must get out of the atmosphere of the place into a more wholesome one without further delay.

So he shook his head in answer to the lad’s warning remark.

“I must go,” said he. “It’s early; I have the day before me. The snow has melted a good deal. I can reach Trecoed before night, I’m pretty sure.”

The lad looked at him askance.

“This is a nasty place, sir, for travellers,” said he in a courteous tone of protest. “It don’t seem so very far from here to Trecoed, but there’s four travellers, strangers to the place, have been lost — altogether lost — hereabouts within the last few years!”

176 The House in the Hills

Masson looked at him steadily.

"Were none of them ever found?" he asked, abruptly.

"One was, sir, two years and more ago. His body was found between two rocks. And the water had washed away most of his clothes, and it was as much as they could do to swear it was him."

"Was foul play suspected?"

"N-n-o, sir, not as I know of. This is a nasty place to get lost in."

The lad seemed to be infected with the reticence his parents had shown. He was evidently anxious to get away and to avoid further cross-examination. Masson smiled grimly to himself.

"Well," said he, "I shall risk it. Many thanks for the advice, though. I know it is good advice, though I'm too impatient to take it. Goodby."

He held out his hand, and the lad took it. Masson had an odd fancy, which pursued him as he ploughed his way down the valley through the snow, that the lad as he bade him goodby gave up all hope of ever seeing him again and even of his ever reaching Trecoed alive.

CHAPTER XXIV.

The morning light was growing stronger every minute as Masson, after bidding young Thomas goodby, started on his walk back to Trecoed.

He saw now, what had escaped his notice in the darkness the night before, that there was another way down the valley, one which looked much easier than the snow-encumbered route he had followed. It was a ridge a little way up the hill on the right, which seemed to form a path much more free from snow than the one he was taking. He climbed up to it, therefore, and was relieved to find his belief justified. A rough path ran along the ridge, sometimes among patches of small fir trees, and sometimes upon the bare side of the hill, but always open and free from snow by comparison with the valley beneath. The slush caused by the thaw was, however, unpleasant and chilling to the feet. He could not walk fast enough through the puddles and over the slippery places to get his feet thoroughly warm, and the path, with its zigzags, took longer to follow than he had expected.

Presently he became conscious of a feeling that he was being followed.

He turned abruptly, but he had just rounded a bare boulder, and he could see no one. The

178 The House in the Hills

fancy was so strong upon him, however, that he retraced his steps and looked round the protruding rock at the path he had traversed. There were foot marks, which he had not previously noticed, ascending from the path to the top of the rock, but still he saw no one.

There descended upon his spirits with irresistible force a belief that he had not escaped from the mysterious dangers of Monachlog after all. Go which way he would, he could not get beyond the malign influence which he felt to emanate from that uncanny household; he was shadowed, even now that he had left the house, by an evil influence, impalpable, but unmistakable, which seemed to hang like a veil over him, shutting him in, closing him in. He began to feel a dreadful doubt whether he ever should get out of this valley; whether he should not share the mysterious, unknown fate which had overtaken his unhappy brother.

With eyes and ears on the alert, with his teeth fast set, with a savage desperation at his heart, he pressed forward, bent on reaching once more the open ground in the valley below, where at least no ambush could be laid for him.

He had to pass through another bit of straggling wood, where the pine trees grew stiff and ragged in a patch upon the hillside, and where a would-be assailant might lie hidden in perfect safety. But he passed through it without incident and came again upon the open hillside, where the path took a turn to the right, rounding one small hill, which brought him within

sight of the ruined monastery and of the walls of the monks' old church.

Here he paused for a moment doubtful, hesitating. The way to Trecoed, or at least the only way he knew, lay to the left, across the stream which ran down the valley, and up the great hill on the opposite side of the pass.

The path which he was following, on the other hand, now turned to the right; and if he pursued it he would have to take a winding course, with more fatigue and loss of time; for he could see that it reappeared on the hill opposite to him, the very hill on which the old monastery stood. He felt that he did not want to go so near the place again; in spite of his tenderness for Gwyn, the sight of the ruined gray walls filled him with a very definite horror and sense of danger.

He resolved, therefore, to attempt the difficult task of leaving the path at this point and scrambling down the rugged hillside, which was at this point both rough and precipitous, into the valley below.

He had scarcely taken the first step downward, however, when he heard a low, suppressed cry of warning from above, and looking up saw the head of Coch Tal looking at him from behind a jutting point of rock.

"Take care," said the peasant; "take care."

He had hardly uttered these words when Masson, who had already discovered the need of great caution, as he found himself slipping down the snowy surface with a rapidity he had not

calculated upon, saw that Coch Tal was not looking down at him, but that he had got his eyes fixed intently upon a figure on the side of the opposite hill.

In his desperate situation, for he was slipping every moment faster down the hill, Masson had no chance of taking a very accurate survey. But he had an unpleasant sense of being surrounded, hemmed in by enemies, which was considerably increased, when his descent was suddenly stopped by a jutting piece of rock, by his perceiving that the figure which had attracted Coch Tal's attention was that of old Mrs. Tregaron, who in her cap and shawl was crouching on the side of the opposite hill on the outskirts of a small patch of firs and leafless bushes.

She was watching him furtively, with her lean neck outstretched, and one skinny, dark hand pointing to some spot a little way behind her.

Masson had scarcely had time to recognize her, and to wonder what connection her appearance had with that of Coch Tal, when he heard the report of a gun, saw a flash from out of the trees behind the old woman and heard a bullet whistle past him.

The next instant the old woman sprang up with a cry and another figure rushed out from among the trees.

It was David Tregaron, gun in hand.

What followed happened so rapidly that it was like a confused dream.

It was not until he thought it all over after-

ward that Masson understood the exact sequence of events.

Then he knew that the gun was levelled once more; that the old woman met her son, that the weapon went off, discharging itself harmlessly in the air; and that the next moment the farmer slipped, and, with a cry, fell, gun in hand, down the side of the hill, out of Masson's sight, into the cleft below, between the hills.

And the old woman clasped her hands, and, breaking the hideous, awful silence which followed with the accents of her quavering, shrill voice, cried, with a thankfulness which made Masson shudder:

"Thank God! It's over! Thank God, oh, thank God!"

CHAPTER XXV.

Masson was in a strange position. His feet had touched a jutting piece of rock which held him firm. But the point was so small, and the side of the hill was so steep that he did not dare to move, but remained in this perilous plight, unable to go backward or forward, or even to lean far enough to the right to see what had happened to David Tregaron when he fell into the cleft between the two hills.

Meanwhile the old woman had relapsed into silence and stood looking down at some object below with the blank, staring gaze which had seemed so uncanny to Masson throughout his acquaintance with her.

The voice of Coch Tal, from the path above him, now called Masson's attention back to the peasant.

"Don't you move, sir, don't you move. You're a dead man if you do."

"All right," answered the doctor, not very steadily.

He did not quite realize from which quarter he was now threatened; whether by Coch Tal himself or by the farmer's gun, or by his own situation on the side of the hill. The pause which succeeded seemed unending. There he remained, with his feet close together, against

the point of rock, his clothing saturated by the thawing snow at his back and the now risen sun pouring upon him across the mountains on the left.

It was a beautiful sight which lay before him; but he was in no mood to appreciate the charms of sparkling snow or rushing stream, of dark firs and picturesque gray rock. In his ears the cry of the old woman was still ringing; he was still asking himself what development of the strange adventure was in store for him.

At the end of what seemed a very long period of waiting, during which the old woman had disappeared, and the whole valley had seemed to be steeped in a solemn, awful stillness, he heard the voice of Coch Tal above his head once more.

"Put the rope round you, sir, and come up carefully. You're wanted."

Masson saw by this time that a strong rope, with a noose at the end, was being lowered to him from above. He made himself fast to it, and, with the help of Coch Tal and Tom, regained the path with some difficulty. He found Coch Tal looking very grave, and the lad Tom in a panic of strange fear, trembling from head to foot, and unable to speak.

No sooner was the doctor on his feet than Coch Tal drew him rapidly along the path to a point where there was an easy descent into the valley below.

"I told you, sir, that you were wanted," said

184 The House in the Hills

he in a grave voice, "but I don't know as I was right. Look!"

He pointed to a spot below them, where, jammed between two sharp rocks, there lay something undistinguishable, dark, motionless, at sight of which Masson started and turned toward his companions. His startled, questioning look was answered by their faces.

There was no need for words for him to know that what he saw was the body of the farmer, and that he was dead.

It was Masson who hurried forward, and who attempted the vain task of withdrawing the body from its horrible position. Tregaron had fallen into the cleft between the hills at a point where two jagged rocks, rising up from the bed of a little mountain stream, formed a narrow and fatal cradle, into which nobody could fall without being horribly mangled and crushed by the terrible contact.

Into this ghastly deathbed David Tregaron had fallen, and the first glance which Masson gave, when he got, with some difficulty, close to the spot, showed him that death must have been instantaneous. The broken gun lay in pieces within a few feet of the body.

With much difficulty, since Tom, at the first suggestion that he should lend his aid, ran away up the path at full speed and disappeared, Masson and Merrick extricated the bruised body from its position, and carried it up the path. Although the farmer had been a short, spare man, the position in which his body had been

found, and the steepness of the ascent, made the journey a long and tedious one.

When at last they got on the little table-land on which the farmhouse stood, Masson was seized with a strange sensation of sick horror on finding himself once more brought to the place which he had hoped never to see again.

At the thought of seeing Gwyn again, in these shocking circumstances, made him stop, and hesitate, and look at Coch Tal with such an expression of distress that the peasant broke the silence in which they had done their work.

"You'd better come in, sir," said he, with an apt appreciation of the doctor's mood; "you'd better by far hear all about it, now you've come so far!"

At that moment the lad Tom, still in the same state of nervous excitement as before, opened the farmhouse door and came out. His eyes were red, as if he had been crying; and the expression of his whole face, instead of being sullen and downcast as usual, was wild and disturbed. He came toward them hurriedly, with a sidelong, shambling walk, as if he was anxious to reach the two live men without coming near the dead man they bore.

"Come round the back way," said he, "through the outhouse!"

Masson and Coch Tal, with their burden, followed him to the south side of the farmhouse, making their way with difficulty over the bits of ruined masonry with which this part of the premises was especially encumbered.

Tom opened a little rough wooden door, which had been inserted in the massive old wall which had once been that of the north aisle of the church. This admitted them into the outhouse, where a rough trestle bed had been already put up for the reception of the body. They placed the remains of the farmer upon this resting place, and then Masson and Coch Tal, still in silence, turned toward the kitchen door, which Tom held open for them.

But on the threshold Masson hesitated. Standing still within the gloom of the outhouse, of which he had already such uncanny recollections, he felt a dread seizing him of the story that he should have to hear; he was oppressed by the knowledge that the key to the mystery of Monachlog would, within a few minutes, be in his keeping.

Before him, sitting by the kitchen fire, sat Gwyn Tregaron, with her head back against her high chair, her eyes closed, and an expression of intense agony on her pallid face. On the opposite side of the hearth stood the old woman, leaning upon her stick and pointing with a lean finger to the door of the outhouse.

Tom, who was standing just inside the kitchen door, made a gesture to Masson of encouragement, of invitation to enter; and, as he did so, he uttered, in a hoarse whisper, these significant words:

“Come in, sir; come in. There’s nothing to fear here; nothing now!”

CHAPTER XXVI.

Startled by these words, Masson said hurriedly: "Thank you," and entered the kitchen.

At the sound of his voice Gwyn sprang up and stared at him with wild eyes. She had heard of the tragedy which had happened but an hour before, and it was evident that it had shaken her still delicate frame and struck dismay to her loving nature. She started at Masson for a few moments; then for a moment her features broke into a beautiful smile of welcome; but the next moment a look of horror came over her face; the slight flush died away, and turning from him toward her grandmother with a long, gasping sigh, she fell back into her chair and covered her face with her hands.

And for the first time the old woman, who had roused so much animosity in Masson's breast, showed a sign of tenderness, of humanity.

"Don't-ee cry, dearie. It's bad; it's very bad to bear. But don't-ee cry."

Masson stood transfixed. For here was another mystery presented to his mind. The witch-like old woman, who had been reported to speak no English, and who had, indeed, never until that morning uttered a word in his hearing, was speaking as intelligently and as intelligibly as any of them. Her bead-like black eyes,

188 The House in the Hills

too, whose unblinking stare had been one cause of the dislike she had inspired in him, were now full of kindness and feeling.

He almost felt as if he would rather have gone on his way back to Trecoed without solving the mysteries which hung about the farm than have had to be present at this strange and pitiful scene.

There was nothing for him to do but to cross the floor as quietly and unobtrusively as possible, and retreating into the background of the corner between the fireplace and the front door, to wait until they chose to give him the confidence which he felt sure was impending.

It was Tom who broke the silence. He put his arm, awkwardly but kindly, on his sister's shoulder, and said:

"Don't take on Gwyn. Tell the gentleman, tell the doctor — all about it. You can now!"

And then he went out of the room, nodding to Coch Tal, who reluctantly followed him. The old woman transferred her gaze from the granddaughter to Masson, and then said, in a low voice:

"Maybe she'll find it easier to speak to you alone, sir. And to tell you what you'd better know. I'll come back presently."

And then she retired in her turn, and Masson and the girl were left alone.

For a few minutes she remained in the same position, with her head bent over her hands; he did not even feel sure that she was conscious of his presence. But at last she raised her head

and showed him a face which was drawn into strange puckers and lines by stress of deep feeling.

"Perhaps," said he, gently, "you would rather not speak to me. I am quite content to go away without hearing anything more; indeed, I can guess for myself much that you may have thought it necessary for me to know."

But Gwyn bade him remain, making an imperious gesture of command rather than entreaty that he should be seated. So he took the chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, clasped his hands loosely together, and leaned forward with his arms upon his knees, so that he could listen without appearing to watch her face.

"You must know; you must hear," said she, in a faltering voice, "for all our sakes, and for your own. You must not go away thinking that we are a body of murderers and thieves. We are not. You must not come back, or send detectives back, to hunt out the mystery of your brother's death!"

"Do you think I would?" began Masson hotly, but she silenced him by a gesture and went on:

"Yes, you would, if we let you go away without knowing the truth. You might think yourself bound by some tie of kindness, of gratitude, to keep silent. But in the long run you would say something or do something; you would come back or send some one on your behalf, and we should at any rate all lie under the disgrace; my

brother, and Granny, and poor Merrick, and all! So I am going to end it. You won't expect me to be too hard, and you must try not to be hard yourself. Listen! I don't know how your brother died. I can't tell you that. Nobody now living can. The only man who could have told you can never be brought to account by any human Judge!"

Masson bowed his head without any appearance of astonishment. This was the confession he had been prepared for.

"Nobody else is to blame. Nobody else knew anything about it till you first came. But the moment Merrick saw you on the road, heard your voice, he knew that your brother had — had died mysteriously, and that you, his relation, had come to bring those to blame to account!"

"Ah!"

"When he ran away from you he thought he had escaped. You may judge what his horror was when, believing that you would never be able to find the farm without a guide, he found you here within two hours. That was why he would not come in to supper. And when you were asleep afterward, in that very chair, he came in quietly, with Tom, and loosened the muffler round your neck to look into your face, and searched your pockets to find out your name."

"So it was he! Merrick! I remember!" ejaculated Masson.

"Then he was frightened, and Granny, and

Tom, and all of us. For we knew you would never get away alive, to bring the police back here with you!"

"What? You were so sure of it?" cried Masson, with a shudder.

The girl bowed her head.

"I did what I could to warn you, to save you."

"Indeed you did. I shall never cease to be grateful."

"But all the time I was torn by two feelings. The wish to save you, to spare him this one more crime, and the wish to save him, too. For, remember, I loved him. We all loved him. In spite of all we knew, and all we guessed, we loved him, and would have shielded him. For he was always good to us, so good that we could not believe it when we first suspected him of — of ——"

"And when was that? That you first suspected him?"

"It was nearly five years ago, in the winter. We were very, very badly off, had scarcely anything to eat, and a traveller came by and rested here and talked of his dealings and of the money he had made. He was a cattle dealer, and carried a long leather purse filled with gold."

She paused, overcome by the horror of her recollections.

"And when he went on (the way was pretty open that winter and he knew the roads) my father went out after him. And when he came back he seemed just the same as ever, only he said that he had got paid some money that one

192 The House in the Hills

of the farmers near had owed him for some years. And we were as merry as could be over this piece of luck, till — till we heard of a traveller having been found dead in a stream, some weeks after, with part of his clothes washed away. Nobody thought of foul play, till Tom found out that it was the cattle dealer and that there was no money found. And then we all feared, secretly, not telling each other what we thought — Granny and Tom and Merrick, too, and me!”

She shuddered and paused again. When she went on it was in a more rapid pace, as if she was anxious to get the dismal tale ended.

“But all the while father seemed just the same, and we didn’t dare to speak to him. He seemed so unconcerned that now and then we would laugh at our fears and think we had done him a cruel injustice. It wasn’t till the second and the third accident that we felt sure, sure; and meantime I’d had to persuade poor Merrick to stay on; father made me. And the feeling that he hated to stay, and that he was only staying just for me, was bitter and hard and dreadful!”

Masson began to understand. This, then, was the secret of her strange coldness toward the man who worshipped her.

“And then to see you suspect the poor fellow, when I knew who it was that was in fault, that was dreadful, too! But yet I couldn’t put you right, for it would have been putting my father in danger!”

The House in the Hills 193

"But," said Masson, "if you thought such a thing, I can't understand how you could go on caring for him!"

"You see," said Gwyn earnestly, "that all we had to go upon was suspicion; for although we knew that those three travellers ——"

"Three!"

"Yes, yes. While we knew that they had died mysteriously, and we connected his absences from home with their deaths, yet there was never any difference in his manner to us, and nobody else ever suspected that they had met with foul play. You know yourself how dangerous these hills are. Look at my own father's death this morning."

"Was it you who sent Coch Tal to warn me not to go to Trecoed this morning?"

"Yes. I knew my father was on the watch," whispered the girl. "And Granny knew it, and she went down to watch him; she followed him when he went out with his gun. And it was she who tried to stop him when he fired. And — and you know the rest."

There was a long silence.

"I cannot yet understand it," said Masson at last. "You have all acted almost as if you were in league with your father."

"Don't — don't say that," pleaded the girl. "Poor Tom only obeyed him when he could not help himself."

"Your grandmother, who could have warned me, kept silence."

"How could she have warned you against the

194 The House in the Hills

son she loved? She would have done anything for him, although she suspected him, too. But she held out in her heart against believing him guilty longer than any of the others, and when he told her not to talk to you, for fear of her letting out something, I suppose, she obeyed him, as she always did. It was not until she saw him fire — at you — this morning that she really believed. It will break her heart.”

It was a ghastly story. Masson got up.

“And — and my brother!” said he. “Can you give me no clue, no guide as to the direction in which I am to search?”

She shook her head.

“No,” whispered she. “It might be in Llyn Foel; or at the bottom of the passage in there, that the monks used to draw their provisions up by! Or it might be in one of the streams, or in a cleft of the rocks. Nobody knows. Nobody can tell you. When we are gone — for we shall go — you can come and search. For you cannot hurt my father now.”

Beautiful as this dogged filial feeling might, in the abstract, be, Masson was irritated by it. He was anxious to get away. Gwyn, looking up, saw the impatient look on his face. She sprang up, and stood before him, trembling and agitated.

“You want to get away! You want to get free and forget us!” said she, in a strange tone, with mingled bitterness and tenderness. “Well, you are right! Forget us — all — if you can!”

Something in her tone touched him, and he spoke in a softened voice as he answered:

"There are things I shall never forget, that I never wish to forget. A woman's unselfish kindness and care; her good, noble face and her heroic devotion. I will forget everything but those things as quickly as I can."

He held out his hand, and she took it with a shy look, which haunted him for months afterward.

"Goodby," said she, softly. "Goodby, and heaven take care of you on your way. You can go safely now."

"And Merrick? And your grandmother, who saved my life?"

"Don't wait to see them. They would be ashamed. And she, poor soul! could almost hate you for causing her to sacrifice the life of her son. Ah, you don't understand how we cling to each other, of course! But, take my word for it, and let me bid them goodby for you."

Even as she spoke she hurried across the kitchen and opened the front door. He had no choice but to go.

"Goodby," said she once more, with a little catch in her voice, though the hand she held out again was steady.

"What will become of you?"

"I—I don't know. I don't much care!"

They were outside the door. Kind, tender words rushed to his lips; he drew close to her; he bent to look into her eyes.

196 The House in the Hills

For a moment she wavered, seemed inclined to listen. Then, with a resolute shake of the head, pressing her hands tightly together and biting her lips, she pushed him away, and stamping her foot, and pointing to the path down the hill, imperiously signed to him to go.

As he turned, sorrowfully, regretfully, full of bubbling passion and longing tenderness, to obey her, she ran off, waving her hand with an affectation of lightheartedness, in the direction of the ruined church. She was going to hide herself among the old stones, to cry, perhaps to pray, and to mourn his going.

For one minute he hesitated whether he should give up everything, and go back, and strain her to his arms and bind himself hers forever when his ardor was checked by a little circumstance.

Just as she reached the north wall she stumbled, and a man darted out of the shade and supported her in his arms. Masson watched the meeting breathlessly. The man was Coch Tal; honest, loving, faithful to the end.

He caught her swaying figure, tenderly, not greatly daring.

But Masson saw, in the girl's attitude as she let herself be led back to the house, a little change. She was passive; she did not repulse her lover, as she had once done. That terrible event of the morning had altered the whole course of life at Monachlog, had broken the spell which had bound them all.

Masson felt the tears rising to his eyes as he

turned away, and a lump in his throat which was brought there by some feeling strong as joy, but keen as jealousy.

She would fall into her old lover's arms as she had fallen into his heart — some day.

Three months later Masson came back to the old farm, which he found empty and deserted.

He searched every corner and every nook. He examined every stream and every cleft. He engaged men of experience to drag such parts of Llyn Foel as were sufficiently shallow to allow of such a proceeding; he went down into the passage which had once connected the monastery with the valley below. Some human bones he found, buried in quicklime, dry and brittle, at the bottom of this passage. But they had evidently been there a couple of years and more.

It was the only fruit of his researches. For no trace of the body of his brother Granville was ever found.

[THE END.]

A DAUGHTER OF THE PILISTINES

By LEONARD MERRICK

"It is the kind one longs to find after trying many and not meeting satisfaction."—*Times Union, Albany.*

"A constantly increasing pleasure as you peruse page after page."—*Evening Gazette, Boston.*

"It is a good one and an interesting one."—*Buffalo Express.*

"A noteworthy novel."—*Chicago Tribune.*

"He works out the situation to a fortunate conclusion."—*Book Buyer.*

"A distinctly good novel of real life."—*Boston Times.*

"A capital story."—*New York Press.*

"It is a novel of more than usual interest and cannot fail of an abundant popularity."—*Army and Navy Journal.*

"A delightful story."—*Cincinnati Enquirer.*

"Has a quality of its own."—*Literary World.*

"Unusually strong points."—*Buffalo Commercial*

"An extremely clever story."—*Albany Argus.*

"Interesting creation."—*Louisville Times.*

"With a feeling of loving regret I lay down the book."—*Evening Record.*

"An interesting and well told tale."—*Evening Star, Washington.*

"An extremely clever tale."—*Indianapolis Sentinel.*

"More than usually interesting."—*News, Indianapolis.*

"An excellent story well told."—*Rochester Herald.*

"Starts upon a good literary level, and maintains it to the end, and never for a moment degenerates. . . . One sits through the story with genuine pleasure, and rises from the reading of it with indubitable refreshment."—*Daily Chronicle.*

12mo, cloth, \$1.25

NEW YORK: R. F. FENNO & COMPANY

SEP 12 1899





WERT
BOOKBINDING
Grantville, Pa.
Nov - Dec 1985
We're Quality Bound

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0002205823A